神様のメモ帳6
杉井 光
イラスト：岸田メル
電撃文庫

Kamisama no Memochou - Volume 06

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神様のメモ帳6

高校の文化祭が押し迫る晩秋、ラーメンはなまるにやってきたのは、チャイナマフィアの後継者兄妹。なんとミンさんの親戚だという。ミン父・花田勝の引き起こした事件をきっかけに、なぜか持ち上がるミンさんの縁談。それに憤然と立ち上がったのは、ヒロさんだった。
「おれからの依頼。この婚約、ぶっ壊してくれ」
ヒモのくせして、ついにミンさんに本気！　二転三転の結婚騒動を描いた「電撃文庫MAGAZINE」掲載作に、ヒロさんの師匠初登場の書き下ろし短編『ジゴロ先生、最後の授業』を加えた、大ボリュームのニートティーン・ストーリー第６弾！

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杉井 光（すぎい ひかる）

1978年、東京生まれ。池袋で迎える三度目のクリスマスに、奇遇にもほんとうに柘榴を使ったケーキを予約（なにが奇遇なのかは本書を読めばわかります）。 でも柘榴って何度食べても味が記憶に残らない。成城石井で柘榴ドリンクまで買って試したのに。

【電撃文庫作品】

火目の巫女 巻ノ一〜三
神様のメモ帳1〜6
さよならピアノソナタ1〜4
さよならピアノソナタ encore pieces

イラスト：岸田（きしだ）メル

1983年生まれ、名古屋在住。好きな食べ物はラーメン。好きな飲み物は水。趣味は教育テレビを見ること。絵を描いてるときもずっと見てます。ホームページは http://maigo.jp/

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神様のメモ帳6

杉井 光
イラスト＊岸田メル

Characters

アリス Alice

ひきこもりの自称《ニート探偵》。PCとぬいぐるみで溢れた自室で、ネットを駆使して真実を暴きだす。普段はいつもパジャマを着て、栄養の大半をドクターペッパーから摂取している。

ミンさん

ニート探偵事務所があるビルの1階に店を構えるラーメンはなまる店主。アリスはじめニート探偵団の面々を生温かい目で見守っている。

彩夏

ナルミのクラスメイト。とある事件で重傷を負い、記憶を失ったものの生還を果たす。明るく素直な性格だが、どこかずれてるところも。

藤島鳴海 Narumi

本作の主人公。転校を繰り返し人付き合いを避けるようになっていたが、とある事件をきっかけにアリスの助手となる。なにごとにもやる気がなさげなニート予備軍だが、ロハ丁だけは一人前。

平坂組 Hirasaka-gumi

いまどき任侠を気取る不良少年グループ。しかしその実力は侮れない。

四代目

平坂組リーダー。冷徹な性格だが、趣味特技が手芸という隠れた一面も。ナルミと義兄弟の杯を交わしている。

電柱

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその1。組の中では縦幅最大。

岩男

平坂組、四代目麾下のツートップその2。組の中では横幅最大。

ニート探偵団 NEET Detectives

アリスのもとで合法・非合法を問わず捜索活動をするニートな野郎ども。

テツ先輩

元ボクサーで荒事にたけた武闘派。その一方、パチスロや競馬などに精を出すギャンブル狂。

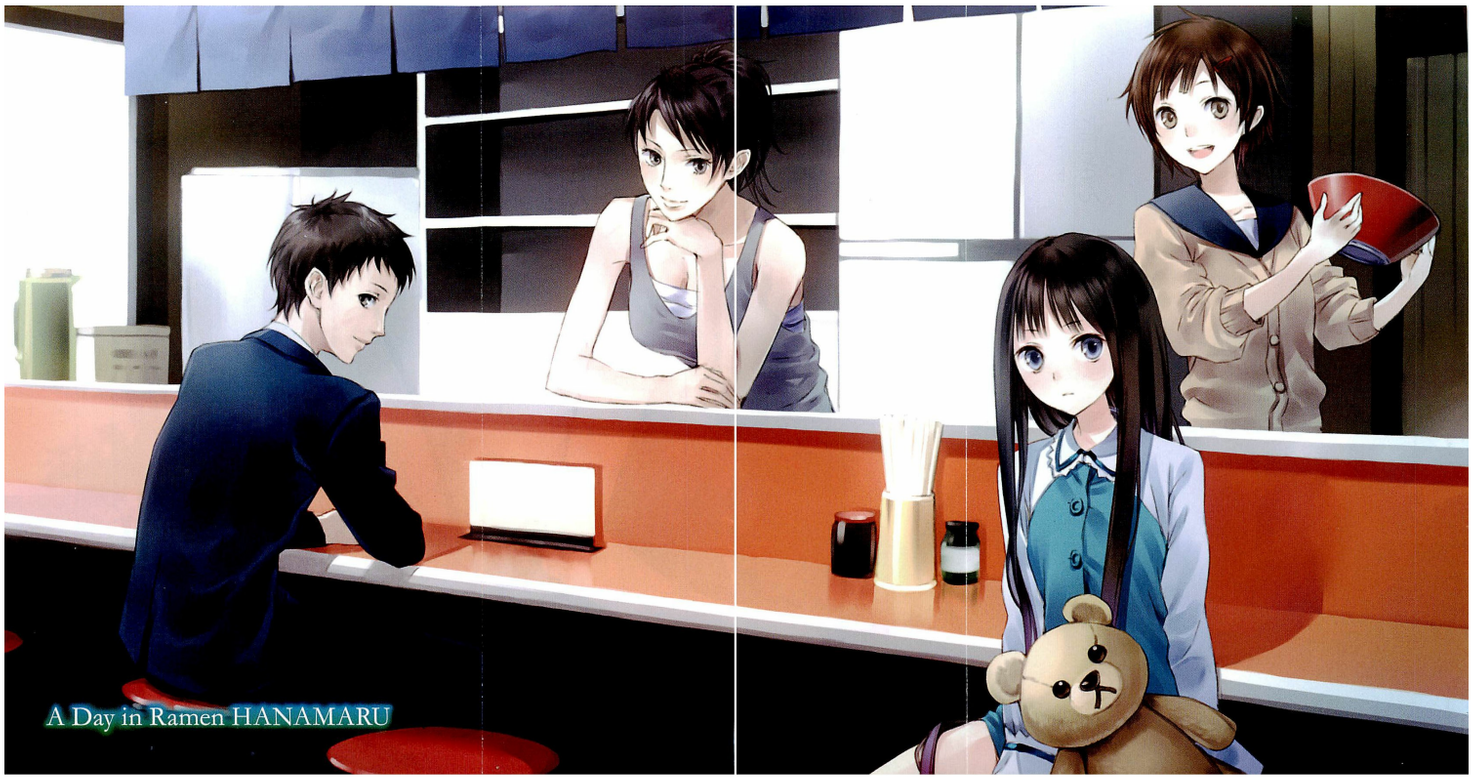
ヒロさん

女のもとを渡り歩くヒモ。卓越した話術でたくみに情報を引き出す（ただし対女子限定）。

少佐

童顔で小学生にも見えかねない外見をしているが、盗聴・盗撮・爆発物のエキスパート。

Designed by Toru Suzuki



黄道盟（ファンタオメン）・龍頭（ロンタウ）の後継者
黄紅雷（ファンホンレイ）

ラーメンはなまる店主
ミンさん

ニート
ヒロさん

"Who knows? Maybe we still feel things, after our death. I’d like to rest, considering that ‘rest’ is the right word, in that little cave up on the tall mountain, overlooking Verrières."

'Le Rogue et Le Noir' Stendhal/ Translated by Kobayashi Masaki

Chapter 1

The protagonist of the story I am going to say next was a man who really amazed me.

To be honest, I am not too familiar with this man, and I never met him and talked with him. Moreover, the little information about him was all rumors. The most ridiculous thing is that he practically never appeared in this story. Even so, this is still a story that belongs to him.

His nickname was the “Bear Punch” (Bare Knuckles), and it was said that he earned this ridiculous nickname because he once beat a bear to death with his bare hands. However, that was what everyone called him as, no matter whether he was in Afghanistan, Yugoslavia or Congo. Perhaps that is because Japanese names are harder to pronounce?

He used to be a mercenary that went through many countries, but retired once when he was in his thirties, the age of his physical prime. That was because, when he returned to his hometown of Japan, he met a woman, and fell in love.

Nobody granted their blessings for this romance, but they still conceived a girl. He could not engage in illegal acts while raising a child, so he decided to wash away the stench of cigarettes and the stains of blood as he settled down in Tokyo.

Nobody knew why they chose to run a ramen store. Perhaps there might be some sort of significance to it. The history of Japanese ramen was that it inherited the essence of Chinese ramen, came over from the mainland, from the seas, but the soup absorbed the food cultures from all kinds of different countries, and finally became an authentic Japanese cuisine. Unexpectedly, this matched the background of the daughter both of them had.

However, after his wife died earlier, he abandoned his daughter and the ramen shop on a certain day and went back to the battlefield as the “Bear Punch”

again. The only proof of him staying in this peaceful country, running a ramen shop, was the shutters of the shop.

His actual name was Hanada Masaru.

It was said that when he thought of using his own name as the shop's name, his wife complain that it was too 'primitive', and got rid of the 'da' and 'sa'. [1].

—"Ramen Hanamaru"

The story of Hanada Masaru began and ended here, at this shop with that name.

In any case, though I had forgotten about it recently, I was a high school sophomore, about to turn 17. I only recalled that when chatting with my classmates in the classroom. This is ridiculous. Do I have a psychological disorder.

Anyway, the conversation was as such.

"So Fujishima-kun, one month later, please come help out too. Don't spend too much time on your part time work in October."

The bell indicating the beginning of lunch break started, and I heard to voice of a girl. I lifted my face, and saw a short haircut, feisty eyebrows and friendly looking eyes. It was Ayaka. I was sleeping throughout the morning classes sleeping, and my head was in a daze. Thus, I could not understand completely what she was saying, and also, the reason why Ayaka and the other girls gathered around my desk.

"...One month later?" Will something happen?

"Listen to what I say! You were sleeping during homeroom period again, didn't you, Fujishima-kun? Why do you always come to school just to take a nap?"

I'm tired from all the troubles recently,, I tried to retort, only for the girls to interrupt.

"Doesn't look like it's a nap anymore when he's been sleeping since morning, right?"

"Sometimes, he sleeps till 7pm, after school."

"I heard he sleeps through PE too."

"Really? That's amazing! How do you do that?" I want to know too. That's quite some exaggerations from you guys."

"Fujishima-Kun's really talented when it comes to sleeping"

For some reason, Ayaka raised her chest proudly.

"There was once when we had a conversation while he was sleeptalking."

"You should have woken me up!" I retorted inadvertently, as if it was about someone else. "Erm, back on topic, next month? Is there something?"

The girls' eyes immediately descended into the ice age, and I shunned them by looking at the table, desperately trying to remember.

Today's the last day of September right? Erm, if it's one month later, in October...the end of October...

"Oh, my birthday."

"I didn't know that!" "Yes yes congratulations." "How old are you? Looks like you're an old man with onset dementia, are you seventy-seven-years-old?"

Why are they ganging up on me now?

However, thanks to that, I remembered. I would be seventeen soon. Come to think of it, I'm still a High School student, right? Merely a year had passed since I transferred to this high school.

It's a long story, but I'm doing a part-time work to a private detective agency, serving as an assistant. Looking back at the case files that I myself wrote, it seemed that over the past year, I was involved with more than 10 disputes that would have been required prosecution. There's still half of my high school life to go. Looking at this pace, I estimate that I'll be involved in another 15 cases or so before graduation. I'm starting to feel dizzy about this. What would I do if I graduate into life before I graduated high school?

However, Ayaka brought her face to me, dragging me back to reality.

"It's not about you, Fujishima-kun! It's about the 3rd of November. Do you

know what that day is?"

"...A day of good birth?" [2]

"It's the culture festival! I guess you aren't sure when the public holidays are held anymore because you're on holiday all year long like a NEET." "I don't have the right to forget a little anymore...?" "But you don't remember when the culture festival is!"

Eh, culture festival?

The detective agency that employed me was located in the same building as the ramen shop where Ayaka worked part-time. To the east of a massive station where the JR, the private railways and the subway intersected, I head past a park filled with stragglers, to a backalley that was sparse in numbers. The shop itself was located at a diminutive, unimpressive gray multi-tenant building. The landmark here was a red curtain with amazing embroidery, unraveled at the front of the first floor. The words "Ramen Hanamaru" were written. There were only five counter seats in this small shop. The owner, Min-San, had her hair tied in a pony tail, a black apron over her a tank top, and a sarashi wrapped around her breasts. She was a dazzlingly, healthy older sister.

"Ayaka said she would be a little late these days because of the preparations for the Cultural Festival. So Narumi, why are you here so soon after school?"

I showed my face at 4pm, and Min-San asked me from behind the counter.

"Is it because there's no place for you in class?"

"Th-that's not it! I raised my voice anxiously. "What the class will do was decided when I was sleeping, they told me that I didn't have to do anything, and my table's used as a cutting table. That's why that's not the case!"

For some reason, there are tears coming out. Is that because of the onions Min-san was chopping?"

"There's no use of you staying in my shop either. If you're not going to order, scram. You're interfering with my preparations."

Why are you saying this to me when I'm an ex-employee? But But I can't leave just yet.

"Eh-eh well, you see, I'm here today with a request for the Cultural Festival, Min-san."

"For me?"

"Our class is doing an Ice Cream Shop."

Min-san stopped the hand holding the chopper.

"Hanamaru" was a strange ramen shop, famous for its ice cream dessert rather than its ramen. I heard that before her father disappeared and she inherited the shop, Min-San had been training hard to become an ice cream maker.

"Well, it'll be reassuring if Min-San will teach us how to make ice cream, that's what the girls in class said."

"...I don't have such time available. What about the shop?"

Min-San said with an exasperated look, and the sound of onions being chopped echoed again.

"No, won't it be fine if everyone went to "Hanamaru"?"

"Are you an idiot? That's the same thing. If I'm stuck with dealiing with a bunch of brats, who's going to make the ramen?"

"E-erm, then I'll do it--"

"What are you saying? What are you going to do, Narumi, when your specialty is dropping and breaking a bowl every thirty minutes?"

"I'm sorry, please forgive me. I won't say anything else."

Right. I knew that it would end up like this. She's not pulling any punches.

In other words, this was the one job I was assigned with for our Culture Festival preparations. Convincing Min-San.

"Anyway, our shop has always been a ramen shop, not not ice-cream shop. I do have some pride as a ramen shop owner, you know? It's done. bring this to Alice."

Min-San poured into the bowl a dash of chopped green onions, and pushed the bowl to me. All I could see in the bowl were cooked beansprouts and onions added in. This was always the case, but Min-san would always explain it to me.

"Onion miso ramen without noodles, soup, roast pork, bamboo shoots, or miso."

"There goes your pride!"

I got beaten up.

This Alice would be my employer, and she stayed on the third storey of this building. The door of room 308 had a signboard of it that read 'NEET Detective Agency'. Recently, I had been entering the room without knocking on the door, for I started to think of it as a hassle. The heat of late summer was about to end, yet the air conditioning in the room was chilling to the bone. I passed through the right, a narrow corridor in the kitchen, and inside there was a little room.

"Alice, I brought food."

"Wah! Wahwah!"

I brought the tray with the bowl on it into the room, only to hear a flustered voice from the bed. What's she doing?

The three walls of the bedroom were crammed with shelves, and the computer equipment on the shelves covered everything to the ceiling, while most of the floor was occupied by the bed. On the bedsheet were cute bear, dolphin, cat, capybara dolls, stacked in a hill. A petite girl was sprawled on the bed, trying to backtrack into this pile of dolls. We exchange looks, and the pale face under the black cap was instantly flushed red.

"N-next time, don't just come in so suddenly! I do have personal privacy to be respected too!"

"Eh, a-ah, sorry."

I nearly toppled the tray in my hand, and hurriedly turned my back on the bed as I return to the kitchen.

This little girl was the private detective who employed me--Alice. She was

always living in this room, dressed in pajamas, but I had a peek at the clothing she was wearing just now...and for a moment, I was in disbelief.

She was wearing a black Tricorne, and a black laced shawl was draped over her shoulders. I guess it's not my eyes, but why would Alice be dressed up like that? Does she not wear only pajamas, mourning clothes or rich looking Japanese clothing?

"Woah, I'm caught by the zipper! U-uu, my hair, hurts. Narumi! Narumi!"

Hearing the call for me, I got to my feet.

"Don't come here! Don't look! Hurry up and get me out somehow!"

"What do you want me to do?"

Alice was in agony under the pile of dolls, and not only was the hair caught by the hook of the garter-belt, the zipper on the back was caught in the eye button. Truly a deplorable state.

Hurry and get me out, and don't hurt my friends (those dolls) no matter what, cover your eyes! Alice gave me one difficult task after another, and I decided to ignore the last one as I crawled onto the bed to carefully remove her long hair from the hook, freeing the dolls.

"Stay out there, and come in only when I tell you to!" Just like that, I was shooed out of the office. A few minutes passed, and Alice looked peeved as she opened the door and poked her head out, now dressed in the usual blue bear pajamas.

I was invited back into the bedroom, and for a moment, I could not say anything. Alice too curled her lips as she took out her chopsticks, stirring the onions and beansprouts in the bowl.

"What? If you have anything to say, say it."

Right behind a fuming Alice was a black hem revealed under the towel. I guess she hurriedly stuffed them underneath.

“Erm...is that some new mourning clothing?”

“If these look like mourning clothing, your funeral's going to arrive soon. Death by dementia.”

Is it trendy to deem me as having dementia recently? That's heartbreaking.

Speaking of which, those clothing certainly don't look like mourning clothes. There's no way there is such a strange hate. I guess it's more like a witch that appear in American cartoons.

“Enough already. Forget everything you just saw! Your specialty is at forgetting things, right?”

Alice finished the food in the bowl, and angrily turned her head away from me. The slender shoulders were completely submerged in the rich black hair.

Finally, the sound of rapid-fire typing echoed, and a messy garble of text appeared on the many monitors on the walls. Only when Alice reaches out for the crimson can placed on the side table—Dr Pepper would the typing stop. This hikikomori was so picky with her food, it's unbelievable. Every day, she would eat a little amount of vegetables, and it was common of her to order ramen that could not be considered ramen at all, no noodles and soup added. I was told that she could obtain most of her nutrients from Dr Pepper alone.

Alice's not an ordinary detective, but a NEET detective. She hardly leaves this cramped server room, but she's able to hard into all kinds of sites, and extract massive amounts of data all day long. And I'm the assistant to this detective.

As for what a detective's assistant does--

“Narumi, stop spacing out there! First off, clean up the bathroom!”

I started to feel skeptical about my work as a detective's assistant and my own future as I scrub the bathtub with sponge in hand. At this moment, a doorbell rang outside the ground glass.

“Alice, I bought all kinds of them!”

A boy's hearty voice could be heard, followed by footsteps and the sound of a paper bag being ruffled. It's Hiro. Most of Alice's acquaintances were NEETs with no livelihoods, and amongst them, Hiro is one of the more approachable ones. I guess Alice requested him to go buy something?

I switched the shower on to wash away the cleaning fluid in the bathtub, and

once I stepped out of the bathroom, I saw his back, dressed in a strap-jacket, taking out something from the bag and laying it out on the bed. Alice saw me standing behind Hiro-san, and immediately jolted.

“Hiro! Narumi's here! Hide it!”

“Eh?”

Hiro-san turned around, spotted me, and quickly kept the thing on the bed back into the bag.

However, I saw it, even if it was just for a moment. Clothes wrapped in a vinyl pack. The coloring's really bright too. Wonder what's that?

“Oh? So you're here too, Narumi?”

“...Clothes for Alice? Hiro?”

“Eh? Well, yeah.”

“Narumi! This has nothing to do with you!”

Alice said as she snatched the bag from Hiro's hands, and stuffed it under the towel. Why's she being so sneaky about this?

“You're starting to get interested in fashion trends now? There's no need to be so embarrassed about it now, right?”

“Stop spewing nonsense there. Once you're done cleaning the bathroom, clear up the empty bowl!”

And so, Hiro and I were chased out of the office. What was that about?

“So now Alice's starting to get interested in clothing other than pajamas? Did you select those weird clothes for her, Hiro?”

I tried asking Hiro as we descended the emergency staircase. This guy may be a NEET, but he's a gigolo who would take advantage of his good looks and bluff women to maintain a livelihood, and he's very sharp on current fashion trends. It's hard for me to believe that those weird clothing were chosen by him.

“Ah...hm?”

Hiro finally gives off a snicker, but his answer was vague.

“Well, it's Alice's request! Don't get too deep into this, please!”

Then, he patted me on the shoulder.

“Alice's starting to think of how to attract looks from the opposite gender now.”

No, I don't think that's the case here.

If I had thought about it a little deeper as to why Alice's actions were so strange, maybe I would have realized. Back then, what Hiro took was not a bag from a clothing shop, but a *bag from Tokyu Hands*.

However, back then, I forgot that I had to think deeply. As Alice said, my specialty is forgetting.

We returned to the old gathering spot at the dark bottom of the emergency staircase, and I explained the matter of the culture festival to Hiro, quietly discussing about how to convince Min-san. Hiro folded his arms in front of him, glancing back at the shop from time to time as he answered,

“I guess it's going to be difficult. See, for Min-san, ice cream is well, complicated, in many ways. A lot of things happened back then.”

“Yep, that's right.”

Min-san had to give up on her dream, for the sake of taking over the ramen shop, which her father left behind without saying anything.

“If you're to do it, Hiro, are you able to convince her somehow?”

“I don't have the sweettalking abilities you have, Narumi. Also, I think it's bad to coax a woman with empty words.”

“Aren't you the gigolo? Whose mouth is that talking here?”

While we're trading remarks, the autumn sun descended quickly, and Ayaka came by.

“Ah, Fujishima-kun. You're here too, Hiro? I'll take your orders later. Sorry for being late today. I'll go in first--”

Ayakae energetically greeted us, and entered the kitchen from the backdoor.

Soon after, the sound of water rinsing something could be heard.

“Yes, Min-san, did you hear from Fujishima-kun? We really hope that you help us.”

I could hear such a conversation, and pricked my ears.

“I heard that.” Min-san's voice could be heard. “Unforunately, I don't have the time for that, and I'm not a professional ice cream maker. I really can't afford the time to teach others now.”

I lowered my shoulders dejectedly, and Ayaka suddenly opened the back door, walking out.

“Fujishima-kun, can you think of some way to coax Min-san? You really have the talent to be a conman, so you can probably say some strange chant by her ears or something.”

“That's no longer conning, that's a magi.”

“So you aren't denying that you're a conman?”

“I can only retort one by one! I'll be able to win 2 M-1 Grand Prix championships If I'm able to retort more than once!”[3]

“Narumi, that little retort seem to be a little difficult to understand, you know?”

“You can stop nitpicking too, Hiro!”

“Hmm, I thought it'll be fine if you were requesting, Fujishima-kun. What do we do now? I already went ahead to invite our classmates to Hanamaru tomorrow. If they're here to eat ice cream, I think we can learn something.”

Ayaka frowned, and was about to return to the kitchen, only for Hiro to immediately show the eyes of a hunting bird.

“Your classmates are coming? To Hanamaru? Girls?”

“Eh?” Ayaka turned her head around. “Well, yes. I thought that we could get Min-san to teach us how to make ice cream, but we can't let her leave the shop alone. I guess there's no way...”

Hiro folded his arms in front of his chest, and pondered a little.

Then, he suddenly stood up, blinked at Ayaka with enough charm to overwhelm 500 girls at once, before heading into the kitchen.

Hiro passed by Ayaka, and even bothered to cautiously close the door. Thus, we didn't know what sweet talk he would bask Min-san with.

After that, what we heard was an unbelievable line from Hiro,

“Welcome! Please have a seat inside! Your order please. Yes, one roast pork ramen. Eh? Yes, I'm a new employee. Yes, starting from today. But it's a probation period since it's the first month...”

Dumbfounded, I stealthily nudged the door aside. Ayaka and I could see Hiro wearing an apron, tossing the ramen skillfully at the same time.

October began, and 'Ramen Hanamaru' was engulfed in a strange passionate vortex of pink.

A group of high school girls began invading after school, and also, even the number of female customers have obviously increased. Initially, most of Hiro's girlfriends wanted to see this strange scene of 'Hiro working', but through word of mouth, more girls were lured into seeing this handsome chap who cooks ramen.

“...In other words, Hiro, you gave up on the NEET lifestyle and proudly began work to interact with many high school girls?”

One week later, Major finally popped by at the back door of 'Hanamaru', asking this in displeasure as he glared at the girls of our girls hollering and crowding the kitchen.

“Hm, yeah, that's the case.”

“You're so weak!”

Major reached his hand out for the goggles, shaking his head.

This baby-faced guy, wearing a splinter camouflage helmet and a deep green army jacket may look like an elementary school kid, but he's actually an active college student. His nickname is Major, one of the irresponsible people around Alice.

“You sought the path of a hikikomori, Hiro, and now you are willing to turn yourself from being the one who leech a woman dry into someone who is leeched. You disappoint me.”

Well, I didn't find it disappointing, but I did find it strange somewhere. Was Hiro the kind of person who would ignore his own image for the sake of wooing girls? Well, speaking of which, starting work is a good thing, but I just couldn't help but wonder if there was some other intention to it.”

“Vice Admiral Fujishima, why didn't you stp him? Hiro's one of the important leaders to us NEETs. Now he's going to disappear due to the bubble called capitalism!”

“It'll be better for this world if that vanishes, right...”

As his attire might imply, Major was a bonafide military nut, and for some reason, he kept calling me Vice Admiral. Despite the rank of a Vice Admiral being higher than that of a Major, I never saw him show me any respect (and if he did, I'll be really troubled.) Major rattled off on me, and suddenly slammed the kitchen door, saying, “I shall go save Hiro myself.”

“Min-san, is the meringue hard enough now?”

“I added too much lemon juice by accident!”

“Wait! Didn't I say not to squash the strawberry? The juice will dampen the cheese's flavor.”

“There's quite a lot of liquor here. Is it alright to sell this at the culture festival?”

“It's fine. It's delicious after all!”

“Hiro~ Two more plates of fried dumplings please!”

“Okie! Ayaka, three bowls of Tsukemen coming up!”

“Okay. Sorry to keep you waiting!”

There were cheers of girls who seemed to be optimistic about their lives filling the steamed scent of ramen, and Major literally fainted on the spot.

Even Alice was caught amongst the collateral.

“Listen, Narumi! Don't ever let those girls near the office from now on!”

Alice said as she stood on the bed, her hands on her waist, fuming so badly her black hair was trembling.

Ayaka would occasionally mention Alice in the classroom, and our classmates felt interested as a result. Those girls got increasingly daring, barging into Min-san's house to learn how to make ice cream, and also entered the NEET detective agency on the pretense that they wanted to bring their ice cream to Alice. Well, that happened yesterday.

“I admit that it was my failure to be lured by the temptation of sweets and let them in. However, have they really gone through the necessary education of a cultured civilization? Your classmates couldn't distinguish between me and the dolls!”

Whenever they saw Alice, the girls eyes sparkled, exclaiming things like “So cute!” “Like a doll!” “Let me hug you!” and leapt towards her, cuddling her.

“Goodness! Master, Ayaka and even Mao are all the same. Why do girls want to hug me the moment they see me?”

“...Well, I guess that feeling is understandable. After all, you're cute, Alice.”

I tried explaining, and Alice froze up, her face reddened immediately, steam rushing out as though there was a whistle.

Her lips were quivering.

“...Wh-wh-wh-wh-what did you say?”

Now she's not speaking in proper Japanese. Seriously. What's with her? If she's still embarrassed, I can understand, but why is she so agitated?

“What did you just say? Wh-what did you say about me?”

“Well, you're as cute as a doll, so it's no wonder the girls want to hug you--”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what delusions are you thinking about you?”

“That's not a delusion. Didn't I say that about you before?”

“I never heard of it!”

Eh? Really? Now that she mentioned it, I guess I never actually told Alice this straight to the face. But did she never have any realization of her own appearance?

“I-I-I never thought you would say that, yo-you want to embrace me.”

“No no, what are you saying now? That's impossible.”

“What do you mean by impossible?”

Why are you getting angry because of this? There's reason for girls to say that, but if a guy is to say that, that's criminal.”

However, Alice started throwing empty cans of Dr. Pepper at me, and I had no choice but to run away from the office.

On October this year, the final month of my birthday, a lot of shocking things did happen. A week after Min-san started teaching my classmates how to make ice cream, an incident happened on Monday.

That day, I came to 'Hanamaru' immediately after school.

“What? So you're even shunned by everyone during your culture festival preparations?”

“That's not it.”

I slammed the counter table hard to refute Min-san's claim.

“My work's mostly about making posters and pamphlets, so I need to go home and work on the computer!”

“Perfect timing though, Narumi. Come try this new ramen flavor I developed.”

Hiro, dressed in an apron, poked his head out from the kitchen to say this.

“Looks like you're already adapted to working here already...”

“I never thought this guy would be able to take over the preparations.”

Min-san shrugged as she said this.

“If you have the ability, why didn't you start working in the beginning?”

“I had a thought before that I would practice in case there's such a chance! It's

'Hanamaru', so I'm willing to help. It's not because I have any intention to work, you know."

"Do you really like the idea of having a group of high school girls come here? So the reason behind your actions is just for the sake of women?"

"Of course it's for the sake of women."

And so Hiro got a flick on the forehead from Min-san, the smile on his face brighter than I have ever seen.

However, I tried eating the Cantonese noodles Hiro made, and the doubt in my heart grew. Why was Hiro willing to go this far? If he started showing off his abilities as a gigolo, it wouldn't be difficult for him to woo many high school girls on the main streets. Even if he does intend to know many girls by working at a ramen shop, he didn't have to develop a new ramen dish, did he?

It seemed like,

He intended to run the ramen shop along with Min-san in the future?

No no no. That's impossible, right? Min-san can't possibly continue taking care of this irresponsible gigolo.

Right when I'm about to finish the sample ramen, the girls from my class arrive at 'Hanamaru'.

"Hello, Hiro~!"

"Ayake told us! We heard that you developed a new ramen dish?"

"I want to try it too."

"Glad to hear that, but too bad I didn't cook that much today. How about coming over to my house next time? Next time, I'll treat you out for a meal, and then we'll go out together, okay?"

"I'll definitely go!"

I never thought there'll be someone who would woo girls as naturally as it would take to breathe. I had the intention of putting the bowl discrettly on the counter, only to see Ayaka and the culture festival committee member approaching Min-san awkwardly.

“Min-san, there's something, we have some apprehension talking about...” Ayaka fidgeted as she rubbed her hands.

“What is it again?”

“The Student Council People seemed to have been notified by the health department, that no food other than instant heated food can be sold.” The culture festival member said.

“Hm?”

“Erm, so for raw foods, we need someone with some food license who can sell them.”

“Ah, someone in charge of food hygiene?”

Min-san scratched her head.

“A lot of raw ingredients in my ice cream, huh?”

I inadvertently leaned over the counter, listening intentively. Does that mean our class' activity won't be approved? Why didn't they say so?”

“We're troubled to be notified now!” “The student council members said that they got careless in their checks.” My classmates added on.

“Now then, what will you do? Stop selling?”

“Erm, about that.”

Ayaka lifted her eyes.

“Min-san, you have a chef permit, don't you?”

“...So I've to do it?”

“Please do so!”

Ayaka, the committee member girl and a few girls who may or may not know what's going on, a dozen of them or so immediately clap their hands together and bowed.

A chef could be in charge of preparing the ingredients, and at the same time, did not have to attend the relevant lectures. In other words, all we could was to boldly ask Min-san and hope that she would come to M high school and help

man the ice cream stall on the day of the school festival.

“But that is your school activity. There'll be issues if an outsider like me is to be in charge, right?”

“We really did our best to fight this one from the student council. It all started with their neglect, so it looks as though they'll specially accomodate this for us.”

Ayaka's methods are as amazing as ever, but is this request really alright?”

In any case, Min-san folded her arms togeter, and looked up at the oil stains in the ceiling, letting out a sigh. After that, she said to Ayaka,

“...November, 3rd and 4th, I guess?”

Ayaka's face immediately dazzled like a strawberry.

“Thank you very much, Min-san.”

The incident happened a few minutes later. Maybe it was not something that could be considered an incident, but it was a trivial matter nobody ever thought of being confirmed.

However, that major incident that occupied the final month of my 16th year did start off on this very day.

Before the lesson on how to make ice cream began, the culture festival committee told Min-san,

“We'll need the student council and the teachers to watch. Min-san, can you lend us your chef license to photocopy?”

“Okay. Narumi, go copy this.”

Of course, she called me. I appeared to be the one with the least to do, and I was already used to being a runner. Thus, I had a chance to first witness that fact.

Chef Permit.

Main Residence, Tokyo.

黄 明麗

I widened my eyes, and started at the 3 words beside the residence. At first, I didn't understand the meaning of that line of words.

“What is it? Hurry up!”

“Eh, well...”

I stammered as I pointed at that part on the permit, and Min-san frowned for a moment, before she appeared to have understood.

“Speaking of which...you guys never knew my real name, huh?”

“...Real name...”

I see, so this is the real name...well, I suppose. Anything printed on a license has to be a real name. Ayaka and Hiro leaned over, looking confused as they peeked at the documents in my hands.

“My mom's from China! This name is really inconvenient though, so I always told everyone else my dad's family name, Hanada.”

I had a peek at Hiro, and even he widened his eyes. Looks like even those that knew her for a long time did not know. Min-san too looked awkward, probably because both Ayaka and I were giving unnatural looks, and Mincould only turn her head aside.

“I wasn't deliberately trying to hide it! It's troublesome to explain, and I didn't really have to, so I didn't!”

“...Hm, yeah, I guess...” I muttered to myself. It's true that there was no chance for Min-san to actually mention it, and even if we already knew, it wouldn't be much different from now.”

“How do we read you name, Min-san?”

Ayaka went straight to the point and asked.

“Huang Ming Li.”

“So that's why everyone calls you Min-san...” Hiro said with a sigh,

“Ah—seriously, why is this happening? Is there really something to hoorah over? Have you heard any Japanese with the name 'Ming'?”

She's right, now that she mentioned it. I knew her for a year, but I never noticed this.

“Alright! Go photocopy this now!”

Min-san obviously was unhappy, and tilted her head as she went down the corridor where her listeners were waiting, vanishing. I guess she's frustrated about this because she encountered this situation so many times in her studies? I barely managed to eke out a wry smile at Hiro and Ayaka, and left 'Hanamaru' for the convenience store. I felt that I was doing something wrong here. No matter whether Min-san was a Martian or an Earthbound, it wouldn't matter to our past or futures. At least, that was what I assumed back then.

Back then, we did not know something. We did not know the heavy significance of the family name 'Huang' Min-san bore.

Only on the next day did we thoroughly realize it. That man came to our NEET detective agency.

It was 4pm when those men suddenly entered 'Hanamaru', and back then, only Hiro and I were in the shop. Hiro was preparing the roasted pork, and I was on the corridor linking the kitchen to the house, taking photos for the menu to be used for the culture festival.

The shutters could be heard sliding aside, followed by Hiro's voice.

“Welcome! Sorry, but we have yet to open shop--”

That voice was overpowered by the sound of a bowl breaking on the floor.

Shocked, I poked my head into the kitchen, and saw three men outside the counter. There were two men dressed in black suit, hunks with muscular faces, and the young man leading them was standing in the middle, reaching his hand out, grabbing Hiro by the collor.

“Hey! Where's Ming Li? Who are you? Her man?”

“No no no, unfortunately not. Min-san isn't someone like that! Oh, and who

may you be?”

Hiro answered with a nonchalant tone. I really didn't have such reckless guts, and I guess that my legs might quiver, and I wouldn't be able to say anything.

Who are these people—Yakuza? They did mention Min-san's actual name, and though their Japanese in fluent, but the name 'Ming Li' was clearly of Chinese pronunciation. Even I, who didn't know Chinese, could hear. Are they from China?

“What else? What do you mean? Hey, are you planning on putting a move on her?”

The young man growled. He had a slick hair, and eyes as sharp as a raptor. He's wearing a branded suit, but clearly, he was a shady person.

“Young Lord, this isn't the time to say such things now, right?” The men in black suits behind the young man both chimed in advice.

At that moment, I heard a voice from the other end.

“Hey! What are you doing? Let go of him!”

The man in suit let go of Hiro, and turned around. Min-san was standing at the door, holding a grocery bag, her eyes widened as she saw his face.

“...Hong Lei? Why are you here?”

“Ming Li!”

The man with the slick hair sounded elated, and deliberately flicked his hair back.

“Did you just come back? It's been a while. How have you been recently? You should have paid us a visit from time to time. The Dragon Head, grandfather and everyone was worried about you.”

“Why do I have to show up at the Huangs? I got nothing with them. Anyway, why I you here?”

Min-san shoved the trio aside, and entered the shop, past the counter, and into the kitchen. The man with slick hair shrugged.

“Don't say that now. How many years has it been since you last came back? Oh

yeah, I'll be in Japan for a while recently...”

“Young Lord, we aren't here to look for Miss Ming Li.”

“Please don't forgot the reason why we're here? We're looking for Masaru.”

“Shut up! I understand.”

The man retorted unhappily, and kicked at the thighs of his subordinates.

“Masaru? ...What about my dad?”

Hearing that, Min-san could not help but ask. Min-san's disappeared dad, yeah, I remember his name is called Masaru.

“Masaru hasn't been here?”

The man with slick hair asked, his eyes narrowed. I was scared. For a moment of breath, I saw the atmosphere surrounding this man to drop below freezing point.

“He came by once in April, and vanished without saying anything.”

“I'm not talking about that long back. I'm referring to yesterday or today.”

“No. What happened to my dad.”

“Ming Li, I guess you may not know about it, but Masaru's hired by the Dragon Head, acting as a bodyguard for the main family in Hong Kong.”

Dragon Head? Hong Kong? Bodyguard? What's going on? Who are these people? From Min-san's family? This guy probably knew Min-san for a while, so I guess they're relatives? Hiro and I exchange looks, and we could only gulp as we watch Min-san's sidelong face.

“I don't know about this...when did it start?”

Min-san's voice sounded bitter.

“5 years ago. Our standing in Hong Kong was not very stable, and the Dragon Head was often targeted...”

5 years back. That was about the time when Min-san's dad abandoned the ramen shop and vanished. Right, I remember. Hanada Masaru once snuck back in April, and even showed up at the shop. According to Alice, he had a surgery to

change his appearance completely, and 'went through intensive, unique training'.

In other words, he's one from the criminal society?

“What about that bastard? Did he just sneak back to being involved with them again?” Min-san stirred the soup in the pot impatiently. “Why did he just vanish without saying anything? Can't he just think about how much trouble it would have cost me?”

“Masaru had a deal with the Dragon Head.”

The man with slick hair said, and Min-san frowned.

“A deal? What do you mean?”

The Dragon head really admired Masaru's abilities, and felt that it was a waste for him to be the boss of a ramen shop...”

“So I'm asking, what deal is that?”

“That is to not bother with you, and at the same time, Masaru is to be a personal bodyguard for the Huangs.”

Min-san's black ponytail fluttered in the air, and then leaned on the cutlery rack weakly.

“...Who asked that bastard to do such a thing!?”

“Masaru doesn't want you to get involved with them, I suppose?”

“Enough with that nonsense! In that case, I don't have any relation with you, and you guys probably know him better now, right? Why are you looking for me now?”

“Because that Masaru vanished again.”

“Vanished?”

This time, the man shot a sharp look at Hiro and me, and coughed,

“I revealed too much. This isn't for any outsider to know about. We'll have a word.”

Min-san was silent for a moment, and finally nodded, taking off her apron

before handing it over to Hiro.

“Take care of the shop for me.”

I felt a chill from the bottom of my gut. Is this really fine? Would be fine to let her go alone? Those men didn't look decent, and even if they were Min-san's acquaintances--

“Don't worry. He's my cousin.”

Min-san pointed her chin at the man. She probably read my emotions because of my teary looking face, I guess?

“Understood. Be careful.”

Hiro replied with a smile.

“I'll prepare the dumpling ingredients for you as well.”

An hour later or so, Min-san returned. By this time, Ayaka and the other girls from our class came to the shop.

“You're back, Min-san!”

“Where did you go?”

“Oh yeah, Hiro tried making some ice cream. Try it out, Min-san.”

Min-san merely answered them carelessly however, *Ahh, yeah* and stuff like that. Soon after, I heard her act as though nothing was wrong,*Sorry for being late. We're making Parfaits today.*

After that, Min-san walked out of the back door of the kitchen with a beer case in tow, and our eyes met while I was squatting on the emergency staircase.t

“...Did something happen?”

I asked cautiously, but Min-san merely shrugged.

“Nothing happened. Don't worry!”

If nothing happened, why are you showing such a tired face? I realy wanted to ask her, but I couldn't. I wasn't trying to lecture her, and if I did so, she definitely would not answer me.

Then, what shall I say?

I didn't know.

It was only when Hiro served the ramen I ordered that I whispered softly to him,

“Min-san looks like she's in some big trouble, doesn't she? That cousin of hers doesn't look like an ordinary person either...”

“Who knows? I didn't ask...”

All Hiro could do was shake his head.

“Since she said it's fine, we shouldn't be poking our noses and asking her! It does look like something between them.”

My sigh was mixed with the steam coming up from the roasted pork ramen.

The NEETs that gather at this shop really respected each other's privacy, to an unbelievable degree. This was the case even for Hiro and Alice, and thus, nobody knew of Min-san's real name and family background. They cared about the distance from each other with the frosty, sweet aloofness of an ice cream; this was the little piece of survival wisdom in this city. Sometimes, I would be envious about this, and other times, I would be infuriated.

However, the day didn't end as such. At 11.30pm, shop closing time, another rare guest came to visit 'Hanamaru'. This time, Ayaka and the other classmates had already left for home, and Hiro was preparing the ingredients for the next day, while I was in the corridor, cleaning up the items used for the ice cream making lessons.

“Sorry to bother. Is Ming Li around?”

The sound of the door being slid aside could be heard, followed by the voice of a young lady. Hiro, chopping the cabbage at the basin, and I walked into the kitchen because I heard the name 'Ming Li'.

Standing at the door was a woman dressed in light brown suit, probably of a similar age to Hiro. She had short black hair with a neat fringe on her forehead. The face with a terrifying stare seemed familiar to me.

“...She's not around? May I know who are you? An employee? That's strange. I heard that the one working here is a high school student?”

The woman looked around the dim shop in surprise, and questioned Hiro without courtesy. Since she's calling Min-san as 'Ming Li', I suppose she has something to do with those yakuza-like men in the day? There was some anxiety in her words, and I could not help but stand up and look at her face.

“Ah, I was just hired recently.” Hiro answered. “Min-san's off to the beer shop now. Eh...are you her relative?”

Hiro too seemed to have noticed. The man who came by this morning was the same; there seemed to be something they had in common with Min-san. It's like a heroine in a kung-fu flick who has some stunning valor to them.

“Are you really just an employee?” The lady ignored Hiro's question, and questioned back.

“Do you really have this kind of relationship with Ming Li? Are you her boyfriend or something?”

The man who came by in the day was concerned about that too, and why's that? “Well, Min-san's some powerful enemy who I still can't capture”, Hiro in turn responded, and the lady raised her eyebrow once she heard that. I had no choice but to enter the kitchen, and interrupt,

“Erm, who are you again?”

“A-are you the high school student working part time?”

“Eh, no, I used to work here, but I'm just an ordinary customer. That's not important, so please...”

“Why is it that there's still an ordinary customer here so late at nigh? Isn't this supposed to be Ming Li's house?”

Eh, that's the case, but why are you so angry?

At this moment, a voice from behind rang, “What are you doing? You're going to disturb the neighbors!” Our savior has arrived. Min-san walked in, lifting the curtain[4], only to meett the eyes of the lady who turned around.

“...Xiao Ling? Why are you here?”

“Ming Li! What are you doing? Why did you leave this stranger of a man in your house before going out? And what's with your outfit? Your breasts are exposing!”

“How are they exposed? I keep them under wrap. You're nagging at the small stuff like usual.”

Min-san noted in amazement as she pushed the lady into the shop.

“You're always like that, seriously.”

“Hong Lei came by in the day. Same topic, I guess?”

Min-san said, and the lady covered her mouth in shock. She glanced at Hiro and me, before turning to look at Min-san aside.

“...R-right. Sorry. I shouldn't be nagging at these details right now.”

Huang Xiao Ling, that was the name of the lady, Min-san's cousin.

“I don't know anything, and I said that to Hong Lei. He didn't tell you that?”

Min-san said as she put the beer bottles into the bridge. The man in suit, Huang Hong Lei appeared to be the older brother of Xiao Ling-san.

I was seated at a chair by the back door, peeking as I leaned on it, and saw Xiao Ling-san with her arms folded. Looking at the tone of the conversation, it appeared that they haven't met in a while. Min-san seemed to be distant from her old family.

“...What does Hong Lei plan to do with Masaru?”

Xiao Ling-san asked, and Min-san's shoulders shivered a little, her hand movements ceased as well.

“Who knows? I never asked him. They probably will catch him, interrogate him, and kill him, I guess?”

Suddenly hearing these words from Min-san's mouth caused me to shiver. They'll capture him and interrogate him?

“Why can you be so nonchalant about this? He's your dad!”

“What else do you expect me to do? My dad deserves that, right? Hired by the mafia, and betrayed them. He knows exactly what would happen to him, right?”

Mafia...

So Min-san's mom's family...was a member of the Chinese mafia?

Hiro and I could only overhear the conversation of the two women quietly, and we had no thought on leaving our seats politely.

He was a bodyguard of the Chinese mafia, and betrayed his employers. In that case, the man called Hong Lei came by in the day for this particular reason? All I could feel was a chill climbing my spine. What did Hanada Masaru do exactly?

“I have no involvements with the Huangs anymore. Right now, why are you still looking for me, Ming Li--”

“Masaru-san, contacted me yesterday.”

Min-san widened her eyes. It appeared she slammed the fridge door hard, and turned around, supporting herself on the counter as she leaned forward.

“Why did he contact you alone?”

“If he contacted you directly, those guys would have involved you when they came looking! So,”

“He already he!”

Min-san could no longer contain her voice.

“If he didn't want to cause me trouble, he could have surrendered himself to the police! He's just sneaking around, hiding somewhere, right?”

“So listen to me already! Masaru-san requested me because of you!”

Min-san gulped stiffly. Hiro and I probably had the same reaction.

“...Requested you?”

“Yes, that's what Masaru-san said. There should be an amazing private detective in this building, right?”

We were speechless.

Min-san left the ramen shop to Hiro, and brought Ming Li-san to the emergency staircase at the back of the shop. Of course, I intended to follow.

“Why are you coming along?”

And I was caught by Ming Li-san.

“Actually, I'm the assistant to that detective agency.”

“Aren't you still a high school student? Stop spouting nonsense. It's late, and you aren't going home? What are you thinking?”

Well, what can I say? I guess it was surreal because nobody actually looked down on me from above and formally lecture me on my lifestyle. Even so, I can't just turn around and leave.

“Narumi, don't get involved.”

Even Min-san said so.

“It's fine if Alice alone knows, since she's just going to stay at home, check stuff on the internet, and won't show up. You're going to barge in on the scene however you want, right?”

“You don't have the right to say that about me, Min-san.”

I argued back.

“In any case, it's Xiao Ling-san's request, isn't it?”

“You're great at such useless comebacks, huh?”

Min-san spat those words impatiently. My neck shrank back as I ducked beneath her, and I climbed up the stairs. Unlike Hiro's straightforward tendencies, I would only cling onto the flimsy fact that 'a detective accepts requests, and I'm her assistant'. Ultimately, I still want to know what happened.

“This isn't something we can let a high school boy partake in so casually. You don't understand our family's situation, right?”

Xiao Ling-san said as she stomped up the stairs to give chase, letting out a loud sound.

And despite being a cautious person, the moment Xiao Ling-san stepped into the NEET detective agency and saw Alice on the bed, she was left dumbfounded for a moment. Well, it was to be expected, since Alice certainly looked like an elementary school kid.

“It's rare for Master to come up personally, and rarer to have a guest come along.”

Alice-san stared at Min-san and Xiao Ling-san's faces as she said this. The latter said to Alice what nobody else have ever said.

“Y-you're dressed up like that!? That's not an attire to be shown to others, right? There's also a boy here. Don't you find it embarrassing?”

Such words shocked Alice.

“Wh-what do you mean? What's embarrassing about?”

“That's to be worn when sleeping, right? Your thighs are exposed!”

Xiao Ling-san went around the bed, and drapped a blanket around Alice's body, wrapping her up.

“Wah! Wh-what are you doing!? This is the first time I'm seeing a visitor say such a thing!”

“You can't be showing your pajamas randomly to anyone else, other than your boyfriend or husband!”

Alice's face immediately turned as red as Arashiyama in late Autumn. What's this woman saying? I felt danger, and hurriedly went to the kitchen to hide.

“Uuu, I-I never heard of that one before!”

“Even if you have a relationship with that boy.” Xiao Ling-san pointed at me. “You should only be wearing this when both of you are alone!”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you saying!? Narumi and I don't have that kind of a relationship! What are you here for!? If you're here for a request, act like you have one!”

Back then, the situation was dire. If I was at the bedside at that inopportune moment, there would be an empty can of Dr. Pepper thrown at me. Unable to watch on anymore, Min-san finally slapped Xiao Ling-san hard on the back of the head.

“Is this the time to bother with others? Someone's already dead, what are you thinking?”

Shocked, I turned to look at Min-san. Someone's dead?

“Ah, th-that's right, but this kid is really,”

“That brat in pajamas is the detective you're looking for! Get straight to the point!”

Xiao Ling-san pointed at Alice as she turned back to look at Min-san. Her mouth was half ajar, and she was at a loss of words.

“...Th-this kid? Isn't she in elementary school? Such a little kid's actually a detective?”

“I'm not an ordinary detective.” Alice, curled up in the blanket, pouted

unhappily,

“I'm a NEET detective, an observer who is all knowing and without power. Huang Xiao Ling, I know a lot about you. I know the 6 crippling weaknesses of the secure communications program your company developed, the malfunctioning issue of your language identification system, more than the developers you hired.”

Xiao Ling-san was really stunned.

After a while, she turned to Min-san with a slightly perturbed look.

“Ming Li...did you tell her that? No...it's impossible for you to know that so well...”

Min-san shrugged.

“She specializes in such things! She's not just a pale brat.”

Alice then followed up on what Min-san said,

“The monitor there shows the visuals of the surveillance cameras set up in this building. When Huang Hong Lei and you came to 'Hanamaru', I saw your faces. I checked up on you through the internet, and learned that you are the grand niece of the leader of a Hong Kong mafia caled the Huang Coalition, the Dragon Head. Master never told me anything, and she probably doesn't intend to do so.”

I could not see Xiao Ling-san's expression as she watched Alice. Was she showing fear, or faltering because she was at a loss of what to do? No matter her reaaction, I could only remain sprawled on the icy floor in front of the fridge, unable to say anything.

“So, Huang Xiao Ling, please reveal all the details. Do not worry, for I'm merely a pair of eyes drifting in the sea of information, and I shall not interfere with anything. That dumb-looking high school boy sprawled there may be of no use to anyone, but he has spent more than 10 years with loneliness as his only friend, and he understands the importance of silence more than anyone else.”

I got the feeling that Alice was really badmouthing me. Thanks to her, I was barely able to grab onto the fridge and get to my feet.

Xiao Ling-san knelt by the side of the bed weakly, and from her back, I could see Alice gave an unbelievably gentle expression, saying,

“I can assure that I won't say anything about this.”

The Dragon Head seems to refer to the leader of a Chinese mafia, or that was the meaning I could derive from Xiao Ling-san's words. Min-san's the granddaughter to that Dragon Head.

“Ming Li never told you anything about the Huangs?” Xiao Ling-san again looked back and forther between Min-san and Alice's faces.

“Because there was no need to mention about this before now!”

Min-san had her arms folded in front of her chest as she leanded on the bedroom door, and could only turn to Alice wordlessly.

“Anyway, Masaru-san used to be a mercenary who went about fighting in Center and South Americas, and the Middle East. He met Wen Li-san in Japan, and they got married, so he decided to settle down here...that was more than 30 years ago.”

Huang Wen Li, the youngest daughter of the Chinese Mafia 'Huang Coalition' that was based in Hong Kong.

And Hanada Masaru was a wandering mercenary.

And between them, born was--

“Heh, looks like you understand my dad better than I do, huh? Mercenary? That bear bastard told me he was a ninja! He treated me like an idiot.”

Min-san pointed her finger out to roll an empty can of Dr. Pepper, but from her tone, it was unknown if she was being sarcastic or furious.

“Yeah...Masaru-san often came to play with me when I was younger, and he said he was a ninja too. I really believed it.”

“He has always been like this. Always omitting the important part, getting us all confused. That stupid dad of mine never considered the feelings of others.”

“Masaru-san!”

Xiao Ling-san inadvertently raised her voice.

“Masaru-san isn't that kind of person.”

It was unexpected that Xiao Ling-san would show such an expression. Was she so close to Hanada Masaru?

“What do you mean? You don't know anything, do you?”

Min-san frowned.

“But I knew Masaru-san longer than you do, Ming Li.”

Xiao Ling-san's voice got softer.

“When I was a child, we practically lived together. Later on, when he was hired by the main family, we usually met...”

Min-san didn't seem surprised as she looked aside.

And Alice's monotonous voice broke this awkward silence.

“So Master once stayed at the Huangs?”

“At Shinjuku only. I've never been to Hong Kong.”

Min-san replied with a vague tone.

It was said that the Huangs were divided into the main family in Hong Kong, and the branch family in Japan. The head of the main family in Hong Kong was Min-san's maternal grandfather, the Dragon Head. The head o the branch family in Japan was his younger brother, Xiao Ling-san and Hong Lei's grandfather. It was said that both families often had intermarriages, so not only are Min-san and Xiao Ling-san cousins, their preceeding generation were cousins. This family relationship is probably as complex as spagetti jumbled together, I guess?

Min-san's mom was born to the main family in Hong Kong, but back then, the underworld in Hong Kong was rife with bloodshed, so she kept staying in the branch family in Japan. Min-san thus lived in Japan, and grew up with Hong Lei and Xiao Ling-san.

“Over there, we had brats around my age like Xiao Ling and Hong Lei, and my dad's often out, while my mom wasn't feeling well, so when I was younger, I was practically staying at the Huangs the entire time. I was still a brat, but at the very

least, I could tell that it was a yakuza family. Whenever something happened there, there would be a whole bunch of savage looking people gathering.”

“To be precise, the Huang Coalition can't be considered Chinese Mafia nowadays, I guess? They're chased out of Hong Kong, and the Dragon Head and his subordinates have moved to Shinjuku over the past few years.”

Alice continued on with a monotonous tone,

“The Huang Coalition was excluded from the Triads for a long time, and most of their earnsing were from finance management and communication services. You should have heard of the Zodiac Group? Ahh, I guess Master wouldn't know. What about you, Narumi?”

I nodded. Zodiac's a company that had been growing rapidly recently, and they not only developed the most advanced language identification software, they bought a certain portal site, and if I remember correctly, they opened a security company. Eh? So these are all managed by Chinese mafia?

“Recently, there has been a few cases of Chinese mafia members migrating here and setting up businesses. Almost no different from ordinary mercahnts too.”

“No...that's naive.”

Xiao Ling-san shook her head.

“We do not traffick or sell drugs, but the Dragon Head and my grandfather have lived in the underworld for many years, and will ultimately resort to violence to solve problems. More than a hundred are armed with guns, searching for Masaru-san.”

Guns? Then, even during the day?

In this chilling air, I opened my palm, and closed it into a fist, barely realizing that my body retained its senses.

I once heard that the Chinese mafia were ruthless, to the point where the Japanese yakuza could be considered charity organizations. It was to be expected that Min-san and Xiao Ling-san warned me sternly 'not to interfere'.

“...So, what did Hanada Masaru do?”

Alice's hissed voice seemed to pass through the cold air in the room.

Xiao Ling-san and I glanced aside at Min-san, but the latter merely looked away, giving a look that was saying, *just say whatever you want.*

Xiao Ling-san lowered her eyes, biting her lips several times, and said,

“He murdered the Dragon Head's granddaughter, and ran away.”

A fatal metallic sound echoed. It was the sound of Min-san crushing an empty can beneath her feet.

“I'm fine. I knew about this already. Hong Lei told me.”

Min-san threw the flattened can to the door, and the faint metallic sound echoed in the cold air of the detective agency.

Xiao Ling-san finally spoke up again.

Huang Hong Lei.

Xiao Ling-san's older brother was the man with slick hair and sharp eyes who barged into 'Hanamaru' during the day.

He was the eldest son of the branch family of the 'Huang Coalition', and though he was born with the blood of the branch family, he was destined to return to Hong Kong and rejuvenate it.

“However, isn't Huang Hong Lei the founder of Zodiac? It looks like he got quite a few brilliant technications. Is he really going back to the underworld?”

Alice's words shocked me, and I could nto help but turn to Xiao Ling-san. That savage looking man, who had no intention of hiding his true nature as a member of the underworld, was actually the boss of an IT startup company with rising reputation?

“He'll probably hand Zodiac over to me, and take over the “Huang Coalition' himself, I suppose?”

I see, so she's an employee there too? Speaking of which, I guess there's a ferocious predator face beneath her smart office lady facade? I felt goosebumps rising up my arms as I rubbed my palms together, thinking about this.

“The Huangs' thinking are more old-fashioned than you can ever imagine, and

there is no other organization in Hong Kong that values the concept of bloodline more than it. The problem is that the main family couldn't give birth to a male heir that could continue the family business, so when Hong Lei was born, grandfather-sama seemed to have pinned him to continue leading the 'Huang Coalition'.”

Suddenly, I remembered a friend of similar circumstances. He's the son to a Kansai Tekiya, and everyone half-jokingly called him the Fourth. The impression I had of him might be similar to Hong Lei, and if he did not run away from home and was thoroughly trained to take over, would he become like Hong Lei?”

“Because of this, Hong Lei was destined to marry a girl from the main family, the granddaughter of the Dragon Head, Xiang Yu. They only met twice, and had to marry, which is really unbelievable. I really can't accept that rule. What do they think marriage is about?”

Was the branch family in Japan planning such a political marriage to strengthen the bond with the main family in Hong Kong, to seize the authority? This overly dated thinking still exist the world we live in, and really befuddled me.

“So, so that woman called Xiang Yu—she was killed?”

Hearing Alice's question, Xiao Ling-san nodded with a pale face. Right, they mentioned that someone died. Min-san's dad killed the boss' granddaughter, and escaped. But why?

Xiao Ling-san continued,

“About Hong Lei and Xiang Yu getting married, the family intended to announce and invite everyone. However, Xiang Yu was going out with someone else...”

That's...not something that can be handled easily, is it?

“Of course, this was discovered, and the Dragon head wanted Xiang Yu to leave that man. However, that man was a hoodlum who has a drug addiction, and they were fearful of him taking revenge. That's why they requested Masaru-san, who just returned to Japan, to be her bodyguard.”

“Then...”

Alice's voice was as deep as the bottom of the sea.

“Why would Hanada Masaru kill that woman?”

Xiao Ling-san discreetly glanced aside at Min-san, and lowered her head.

“I don't know...the details. But...”

She appeared to be forcing her voice out.

“I heard that the hoodlum went to Xiang Yu's place last night, armed with a gun. He was in a shootout with Masaru-san...I suppose Xiang Yu went to stop them, and they...”

“They were killed by Hanada Masaru?”

Alice's words were like a blowtorch closing in, and Xiao Ling-san could only nod as he chin shivered. At this moment, I started to sense something was amiss, though I couldn't describe it.

What's going on? Something felt amiss.

“The helper taking care of Xiang Yu said that Masaru-san dumped their bodies into a car, and drove off.”

“Why did he have to take the corpses away?”

Alice asked, but I wanted to ask something else. However, the doubt in my heart could not take shape, as I didn't know where exactly did it seem strange. What was it that caused me such concern?

“This is Hong Lei's guess. Maybe it's to hide the fact that Xiang Yu died. If Xiang Yu's still alive when she was taken away, the Huangs would be more cautious when looking for Masaru-san.”

“Pretending to take Xiang Yu as a hostage...is that what you mean?”

“It's likely...but there are blood stains in Xiang Yu's room, and a helper as the witness. I don't think such a plan would work.”

“You said that Hanada Masaru once contacted you alone, right?”

“Yes, this morning.”

Xiao Ling-san took out something from the inner pocket of her coat, a

smartphone. She gripped firmly onto it, clutching it at her chest.

“Why did he contact you, Xiao Ling?”

Min-san muttered.

“Actually, you don't know about this, Ming Li, but I do talk about a lot of things with Masaru-san. I suppose her knows that I hate being involved with the underworld.”

“So he thinks you'll definitely help him? And killed a woman? You got to be kidding. Is he insane?”

“I said it appears to be an accident!”

Xiao Ling-san could not help but turn to Min-san and argue back. At this moment, Alice's cold voice rang.

“An accident, or was that what Hanada Masaru himself said? Is he asking that you help him because he killed someone due to his negligence?”

Xiao Ling-san turned back to look at Alice, and shook her head.

“He wouldn't tell me anything about what happened. Just that...”

She hesitated, and was then able to barely carry on.

“He said that it is something troublesome that would definitely bother Ming Li if she was involved, and told me to do my best to help. He said that it would be fine if I'm to ask the detective agency here...”

“That's it? That's all that you were requested to ask?”

Xiao Ling-san seemed hesitant as she nodded.

Alice let out a long sigh, and from the blanket, she reached for a large bear doll, cuddling it.

“In that case, I won't be able to accept the request.”

I heard a little gasp, and it probably came from me. Xiao Ling-san continued to keep her lips sealed.

“Your explanation is basically asking me to barricade the entire world with a wall to prevent a meteorite from crashing somewhere. That is the job of a

religious teacher or politician, not a detective.”

Xiao Ling-san remained silent as she bit her lips.

It's true that this wouldn't be enough to warrant a request. Min-san was hardly in any danger, and if we didn't know what would happen, we wouldn't know how to avoid it. In this situation, it's asking too much for us to 'find some way to help'.

I believe Hanada Masaru and Xiao Ling-san should know this very well. In that case, why did she still come here?”

The answer itself arrived when the cellphone rang in Xiao Ling-san's hand. It was a ringtone from her smartphone.

“...It's from Masaru-san!”

Alice was taken aback by Xiao Ling-san's voice, and she suddenly threw something over. It was the end of a cord.

“Switch on the speaker!”

Xiao Ling-san hesitated slightly, but nodded as she attached the cord to the smartphone port. A second later, Min-san snatched the phone from aside.

“Hello? Dad?”

A shrill static could be heard in the room, followed by a man's growl.

“...Ming Li?”

“Dad? Damn it, dad, where are you now? What are you--”

“I'm on the run. Can't talk for much more. Listen. The Huangs might give lots of excuses and come look for you. Ignore them all.”

“What nonsense are you spouting now? Who's the one causing all this trouble!?”

“Anyway, I just need a week. Wait for me for a week! I'll contact you later. If anything happens, ask Xiao Ling, or the detective and the brats who tag along with her.”

“Hey dad! Dad!”

The man's voice suddenly voiced, and left behind was a weak beeping. Min-san was so furious, she nearly threw the smartphone onto the floor, only to recover at the last moment, and stuffed the phone hard into the pocket at Xiao Ling-san's chest.

“What kind of nonsense is that!? Does he not understand what he did? He's telling me to wait a week? What can he change in a week? Is he planning to fly to the sky?”

“Ming Li, Masaru-san--”

“Shut up. Just go back already, Xiao Ling.”

Min-san left those words as she stomped the floor and stormed out of the detective agency.

Only Xiao Ling-san's sigh broke this frigid silence.

The next day, I was worried about Min-san, and so I skipped the 6th period and hurried from school to 'Hanamaru'. When I went through the red curtains, I heard this converation,

“Well, she might look aloof, but she's cute. And she kept telling me off.”

“Heh. Does she look like Min-san?”

“She does she does. You'll know when you see her, Tetsu. Even the large breasts.”

“Hiro-san, don't tell me you bedded her while sending her home?”

“No no no no. Even I would have a look at the situation first! Besides, after talking about that kind of thing...”

“Wh-what are you guys talking about.”

I stopped at the door without thinking.

There were only two people in the ramen shop, after the lunch peak period. One of them was Hiro, wearing an apron and cleaning the air purifier behind the counter. In front of Hiro at the counter was a muscular guy seated there, with wire-like short hair and tanned, bulging muscles. It's Tetsu-senapi. 5 years ago,

he dropped out from M High School where I study, and now he's a pachinko pro.

“Yo, you're early, Narumi. Oh yeah, you saw her yesterday, didn't you? Min-san's relative...the young one. You saw the guy too, right?”

“Eh, ah, yeah.”

He started asking without holding back his curiosity, and I really didn't know how to answer.

“Listen to me, that Hiro sent that woman, erm, it's Xiao Ling, right? Anyway, he drove her home.”

“Ehhhh!?” Aren't you going too fast? No, the atmosphere yesterday wasn't like that, right?

“No, I just sent her home. I'm serious okay?”

Hiro smiled as he explained himself.

After asking, I learned that last night, Min-san stormed downstairs in a huff, quickly tidied up the shop, shooed Hiro out, and brooded alone at home. Soon after, Xiao Ling-san came down from the third floor.

“She looked a little devastated...it was already past midnight, and I was driving, so I had to ask if she wanted a ride! It's gentlemanly courtesy.”

I sat down on the chair next to Tetsu-senpai, and could only sigh. I was really like a fool to think too much into this.

“That woman surprised me too. Didn't expect her to dare take Hiro's car home.”

“Oh, that's actually, it looks like she's curious about my relationship with Min-san. She kept asking if I'm her boyfriend, or that I had any intention to be that, whether I have such thoughts, stuff like that.”

“Speaking of which, she seems to be very curious about this. Why's that?”

Also, that mafia heir Huang Hong Lei seemed to be obsessed with this too.

“I don't know why either? Anyway, I told her that she could talk on the car, and since it was late, I'll send her home...and she did.”

Err. This woman's very particular about etiquette, but very careless.

“And then you went to the hotel?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

“I told you I didn't! She told me a lot of things about Min-san's childhood; I never thought Min-san would be so cute before...”

“Erm, was that only all you talked about?”

I interrupted, and Hiro and Tetsu-senpai widened their eyes, going silent.

“E-erm, about Min-san's father, you didn't ask anything about this incident?”

“...I did try to ask casually.”

Hiro noted vaguely.

“Then...then!”

I leaned my upper body over the counter, inadvertently raising my voice. *Aren't you going to help?* However, I didn't say those words, and that notion remained stuck in my throat.

Again, I sat on the chair.

Min-san has yet to encounter any trouble, and Xiao Ling-san didn't make a formal request, so we had no idea of what to do. Hiro and the others were in the right.

But even when looking up at the clear skies, I still fretted over whether there would be something falling, faltering in my heart. I had a feeling that Hiro and Tetsu-senpai were still too aloof. If this kept up, Min-san would definitely be involved in something troublesome. Hanada Masaru said to wait for a week. What would happen in a week's time? There was no guarantee that the situation wouldn't take a turn for the worse, right?

Furthermore, Hanada Masaru himself was on the run, pursued by the underworld, and nobody could assure that he would come back safely—

“...Ah.”

At that moment, I suddenly realized what that irregularity in Xiao Ling-san's words were.

Xiao Ling-san and Hanada Masaru were rather close, so she should be worried about his safety too. However, she never once requested for us to 'save Hanada

Masaru', even in front of a detective.

Was it because Hanada Masaru never requested her to do that?

No, that was impossible. If Xiao Ling-san was that cold hearted, she probably would not have showed up. Was it because she didn't trust the NEET detective agency? If that was the case, she wouldn't have talked to us with such great detail, and wouldn't have let us hear that phone call.

Then why?

It was a baseless instinct, but there was something more to that woman.

Most likely—she was hiding something.

What's she hiding? I was taken aback by my own imagination. Xiao Ling-san didn't seem to be that kind of person. She seemed to be concerned about both Hanada Masaru or Min-san...

“...Oh yeah, where's Min-san?”

This was where I realized that I've yet to see Min-san.

“She went out. I think that man called Hong Lei gave her a call.”

“Eh? What/”

I leaned forward to approach Hiro. Min-san was invited out by that savage-looking mafia man?

“Wh-why are you able to remain so calm, Hiro? Aren't you worried?”

“Worries are just worries. The issue is that we can't interfere, right?”

The frustration seemed to twirl my gut in a twist.

There was no request. Are you just going to let things be? An absurd sense of rage suddenly arose in me.

However, the developments progressed beyond my expectations. After 3pm, Min-san finally returned to 'Hanamaru'. She wordlessly folded her arms and stood in the kitchen for a while, either because she was fuming or brooding, and had no intention to start work. What did Hong Lei say to her?

I stayed at the gathering spot at the back door of the kitchen, peeking at Min-san discreetly. Increasingly worried, I nudge the door slightly, preparing to call out to her. However, Min-san pushed the back door aside, and spoke up before I could.

“I'll talk to you first, Narumi. Will inform Ayaka later...”

“...Is there something?”

“Your culture festival is on the 3rd and 4th of November, right? I won't be able to make it on the first day.”

“I see...”

For a moment, it appeared that Min-san didn't know where to begin with. What's going on? What happened? Did something happen with her family? Right when I intended to ask her, Min-san spoke up first,

“Just now, Hong Lei called me to the Huangs, and requested me to do something.”

“Requested...what?”

“Well, isn't Hong Lei's fiancee—dead already?”

Min-san spoke, and at this moment, Hiro, who was preparing in the kitchen, stopped what he was doing as he lifted his head, “Well, the invitations were already sent out to inform everyone to attend the wedding, so there's no way to cancel it at the last minute. They want to keep their pride, to the point of hiding the fact that something happened to the bride...”

I blinked, momentarily unable to comprehend the meaning of those words.

“So Hong Lei asked me to be a substitute.”

I was dumbfounded.

“Bride?”

“Yes. I'll say first that it's just a substitution! I'll just help to make sure that wedding goes smoothly, and not really to marry him. Hong Lei said that it's just a meeting for the relatives, for the old heads with not many days left to relax.”

“Why do they want you to be the subtitute, Min-san?”

Min-san looked really displeased.

“I heard that it's because I have the blood of the main family anyway...but I don't want to be a replacement for the dead! Hong Lei said that it all started from my dad, and I really had a hard time refusing...that's basically a threat!”

Min-san said, and sighed.

“Then, you promised?”

“I had no choice. The unveiling ceremony will be held on the 3rd of November, so I can't help you guys with the culture festival.”

Once she said that, Hiro, who had been eavesdropping from behind, suddenly dashed to the corridor leading to the inner house without removing his apron. What? Did something happen? Min-san too widened her eyes as she entered the kitchen.

“Hey Hiro, why this out of a sudden?”

“Sorry, I got a call to make...”

Hiro took out 4-5 phones from his pockets.

“...Ah, Xiao Ling-san? It's me, Hiro. Thank you for yesterday. No no, I'm happy. You're welcome to look for me. Hm, alright, yes...”

Xiao Ling-san? He got her phone number immediately. That's impressive. No, wait, why a call to Xiao Ling-san out of a sudden?

Min-san and I remained rooted, blankly listening to Hiro's voice from the corridor.

“...Ah, Yondaime, are you free today? It's fine if you're very late. Mind coming to the detective agency? Yes, right, not 'Hanamaru', but the office.”

“Major? Are you able to come by today? Um, got it. Yes, yes. Right, no, it's about me. I'll pay everything. No, I haven't told Alice. Yes, I'll leave it to you.”

That night--

There were 6 people in the NEET detective agency.

First, the owner of the room, the NEET detective Alice.

Me, the detective assistant.

The organizer, Hiro.

The pachinko pro, Tetsu-senpai.

Fully armed military maniac, Major.

And last of all, a dangerous looking man with the eyes of a wolf, whose hair was bleached nearly white. He's called Yondaime, the teenage underworld leader who ruled the group of delinquents here.

“Unlike you guys, I don't have that much time.”

Yondaime said as he bared his eeth.

“Hiro, do you really have enough money to pay?”

“Yeah. If there isn't enough, I'll sell the car.”

Hearing Hiro's words, some were flabbergasted, and some gulped nervously.

It's true that we were called here because Hiro had 'something to request of everyone'.

“...What request is it this thing?”

Alice was buried in the hill of dolls in the innermost part of the bed, looking up at Hiro as she asked.

“Hiro, your motivations are completely based on women, right? I guess we won't be able to help.”

“Yeah, well, of course, this is for a woman.”

Hiro replied nonchalantly, and then, took out a piece of printed paper and laid it by the bed.

Printed on it was a young man with black hair neatly combed back.

“...Huang Hong Lei. What about him?”

In the midst of this silence, I asked.

“Min-san appeared to have been requested by her family to take over for the

fiancee in this heir's wedding.”

“I just heard of that.”

“What's going on? Why replace the fiancee?”

Major practically didn't know anything, and frowned as he asked. Thus, Hiro explained everything from the beginning, including how the fiancee called Xiang Yu was killed, that he requested for Min-san to be a subtitute for a day to hold the wedding, and how the killer was Min-san's dad, that she was unwilling and yet unable to refuse, everything.

“Just a day? Are they idiots?”

Yondaime spat.

“Even if they intend to pull a fast one, what else after that? Isn't that a wedding ceremony? If they can't marry, isn't it more embarrassing? How can the heir of a mafia be so stupid?”

I was dumbfounded, and then looked towards Tetsu-senpai and Major, who were similarly stunned. Yondaime's right; thinking about it carefully, we know that it's impossible.

“Right.” Hiro muttered. “It's impossible for him to do something that stupid. Min-san seemed to have believed his words, thinking that it's just a little family gathering to let their grandfathers let a future couple and get them to believe.”

Hiro looked around at everyone, and when I saw the atypical earnest eyes of his, I suddenly realized a certain possibility.

No way, but, that's impossible, right?

“I confirmed it with Xiao Ling-san. It's not just a simple family gathering; there are many people from the financial hubs and the top underworld leaders, and it's a very formal wedding ceremony. Huang Hong Lei never hid his fondness for Min-san even before she left the Huangs. After the Hanadas left the Huangs, he kept looking for all kinds of excuses to find Min-san.

In that case—that means.

“So, what?” Tetsu-senpai asked, “She's not really being a substitute, right?”

“That's likely it.” Hiro's start was fixated on Huang Hong Lei's photo. “Hong Lei intends to use the wedding to establish a fact, and in the midst of the confusion, get married with Min-san for real. But that's...”

Hiro slammed a fist onto the photo, startling Alice. Even I was taken aback. I've never seen Hiro being so agitated.

“I won't accept it, no matter what. I'll do anything to stop it. So, Alice.”

“...H-hm?”

In the face of this unexpected development, the petite NEET detective could only give a blank stare from beneath the hill of dolls.

“This is my request, and I'll pay how much it needs to be. Wreck Min-san's marriage.”

Chapter 2

A long time back, I once asked Hiro about the difference between infatuation and love.

Hiro was a thorough gigolo--he could be wearing a Cartier necklace from his ex-girlfriend together with the Rolex from his second ex-girlfriend and Arnami clothes from his third ex-girlfriend, driving a BMW from his fourth ex-girlfriend, and then have a lover's tiff with his fifth ex-girlfrien. To be expected of a men amongst men (though there are people who call him a scumbag).

“You're in your Sophomore year of high school, Narumi, and you showed more talent than I did. I really want to teach your some skills here!” Hiro once said that when I was holed up at the usual gathering spot outside the back door of the kitchen, wolfing down the salt-flavored ramen.

“Let's promoto the way of the gigolo and rope in more buddies!”

“That'll cause a distrubance to society as a whole, so please don't. And having gigolos as buddies isn't really a good thing, right? Won't you be troubled if there's more of them?”

“That won't be the case. Didn't Motonari Mori once say that it's easy for a rope to snap, but difficult for three to break?”

“It's easy to break 3 too!” He's talking about arrows, not ropes!

Because of Hiro's personality, he had a unique viewpoint on relationship between males and females.

“In the trade of being a gigolo, the most important thing is how to control a girl's feelings!”

“You're talking about how to make her think of you as a boyfriend at one moment and a partner in another, dependiing on the time and place?”

Hiro widened his eyes, his lips quivering with emotion.

“I didn't teach you anything, and you already understood the ultimate skiill behind this...you are a genius after all! There is nothing else I can teach you!”

“Didn't you tell me that when you were drunk!?”

“No, I guess that this definitely is something I learned from you!”

This guy's starting to make up memories now!

“How do you make a girl treat you as a boyfriend? Don't you often stay over at a girl's place and take their money, Hiro? That makes you look like a lover there, you know?”

“This has nothing to do with money! The target of infatuation is a boyfriend, but for love, it's a lover.”

“Oh, so anyway, what's the difference?”

“You're saying that there's a difference in infatuation and love?”

I guess the only one I know who would say such a disgusting line unabashed would be Hiro. It was too embarrassing, and I decided to lower my head and not look at him.

However, Hiro answered without a second thought,

“There's nothing different. Both of them are lust.”

“That was unfiltered.”

Then what was with that tall talk?

“For example, no matter how you look at me, from right or left, I'm still Hiro Kuwabara, you know? That's the case. Infatuation and love are just two sides to lust. My job is to show women the side they want to see.”

He was able to round things off so perfectly. Of course, there was a likelihood that all of it was nonsense he believed.

Thinking about it, the words Hiro added on at the back was probably his true feelings.

“So...I'm unable to face them directly. If I meet someone I can face directly, I probably wouldn't be a gigolo.”

The reason why I thought of this was because Hiro's eyes were ever so serious when he said this.

Hiro went about at an abrupt speed, trying to convince everyone who was at the meeting at the bed in the NEET detective agency...he asked us to wreck the marriage, but how are we supposed to do that? What if that Huang Hong Lei has already set up a sweet trap for Min-san to fall into? If us getting involved was to be found out by her, she'll definitely ignore you, right? There's no meaning to this. Min-san only intended to be a replacement and didn't want to marry for real. In that case, shall we spread rumors of Min-san's flaws to the old heads of the Huangs? Like how her hands are hands and feet aren't clean, or that she can't hold her liquor? No, that'll make Min-san very pathetic. Shall we barge in on the marriage like Dustin Hoffman and swoop away with the bride! Idiot, they're mafia! We'll just end up getting carted out with holes all over us...

I stared at the sidelong face of Hiro wordlessly, and was only able to listen to their passionate discussion quietly. I didn't have the strength to interrupt. Why wasn't anyone retorting about this? Why was Hiro being so seriously?

Finally, Yondaime spoke,

“So basically, master was forced to be the substitute because of the debt her dad owes? In that case, can't we just find her dad and tell him to clean up his own mess?”

The surrounding stares gathered upon Yondaime, and the echo of the air conditioning temporarily overwhelmed the silence that filled the room.

“Our specialty is in finding people.”

Major nodded.

“But wait.” Tetsu-senpai interrupted. “So that means we're handing Masaru-san over to the mafia? He'll get killed, you kno?”

Amongst everyone, Tetsu-senpai was the only one who saw Hanada Masaru's face. Yondaime shrugged.

“He gets what he deserves, I guess.”

“Can't say that now? He's master's dad.”

“Definitely can't let Min-san shed any tears.” Hiro tersely stated.

“You idiot, how can master probably cry? Her dad's practically nothing to her, or even a load.”

“That's impossible. Min-san has tears and blood unlike you, Yondaime.” Hiro said. “And Masaru-san's going to be my sparring partner in the future!”

I felt a bowling bowl hurled right at the back of my head. Hiro's...for real. He's serious about Min-san. How's that possible? Wasn't he someone who was called a gigolo by everyone? Nobody actually retorted him. Does this mean everyone knew?

“Is this the time for such nonsense? This is your request, right? Calm down!” Yondaime lashed back.

“Eh, erm, wait—”

I was finally able to interject, yet Alice, who remained silent all this while, suddenly spoke up.

“No, let's do this.”

Everyone turned to look at Alice. The petite detective had her blanket draped over her shoulders, looking at me, before staring at Yondaime opposite her, and then to Hiro at her left.

“Let's do as Yondaime said. We'll look for Hanada Masaru.”

“...Why? Didn't you hear? Hiro said not to.”

“Don't you understand. I'm helping Hiro with the request, **to look for Hanada Masaru.**”

Alice's eyes were filled with starstreams that filled that night, that might break upon contact. I did see such eyes before, and so, I did not know what to say.

Work was quickly allocated, and once that was done, everyone left the agency. Alice and I were the only ones left in the cold server room. Dejected, I sat in front of the bed, staring blankly at the closed door.

“What are you spacing out for?”

“Ah—erm.”

This series of sudden scare rendered me unable to speak clearly. Hiro suddenly revealed his true feelings, and Alice's reversal of the request caused me to feel as though I was lost in a world of mirrors. Well, I would say that Hiro's reaction wasn't completely unexpected. Without knowing, he suddenly became an employee of Min-san at 'Hanamaru', but...

“Hurry up and work! Move 20 cans of Dr. Pepper over here. No need for them to be chilled.”

“20 cans...” Was she planning to drink them all? 7 liters of Dr. Pepper is about the total amount of blood within Alice!

“It might be fatal for me if I leave the bed now. This is an all out battle.”

“...All out battle/”

“Yes. I'm hacking into Huang Xiao Ling's system.”

I was shocked, and stared at the black hair covering the back of Alice's figure. Huang Xiao Ling, the one who came immediately to the office to put in a request after receiving contact from Min-san's dad, but her motivations and thoughts were still vague.

“You started to realize something too, right? That woman's hiding something.”

“Hm...I guess so.”

“She's probably still in some form of contact with Hanada Masaru. Probably knows where he is right now.”

Where Hanada Masaru was.”

And so, this became the current objective of our NEET detective agency. Alice made a request that Hiro agreed with.

“...What was that all about?”

I could only ask her. Typically, it was illogical for the detective to be the one asking.

“I'm not an ordinary detective. I'm a NEET detective.”

“I know that...”

“Once I receive a request, I can become the all-seeing eye that oversees the ends of all 3,000 worlds. Without receiving a request, I am merely an empty, silent window.”

“I...know that too.”

“This matter is a little strange. There are too many words shrouded in darkness, and Hanada Masaru is hidden at the center of it. I'm afraid that everything might be buried along with him, slowly rotting in the mud. Without receiving a request however...”

Alice's voice seemed to be yearning for something, only to vanish in the strong cold breeze.

I sighed, and went back and forth between the fridge and the bed, moving a large number of Dr Pepper, and stacking them in a pyramid.

She couldn't help if there was nobody who made a request.

A request would be the reason why this NEET detective would take action, and the shackle that bound her down. Alice said many times that the detective had to be limited to the position of a representative. The power of words is too powerful, it can shred, , carve, sculpt, or even shape a person's heart.

But despite this, I often saw her leap beyond that boundary, and got deeply hurt as a resukt. As I was as useless as a tattered plastic umbrella.

I knew how useless I was, but I tried saying to her,

“I once had a thought, I was sure that NEETs had to be either like this or that. Isn't it stupid that NEETs have to take action only when they're asked? That'll only make things complicated. I don't know how to stop Min-san from being coerced into getting married, and I don't know what we can do if we find Hanada Masaru...bu-but, we can't just leave this aside, right? He's Min-san's dad after all, you know? Isn't that enough reason to help him?”

I said that unabashedfully, and lowered my head, rubbing my palms on the pants of my uniform. I didn't spill anything, yet there was a moist feeling. Maybe it was the humidity from the depressing words I said?

What was the point of saying such words? I could not help but wonder, and I did not dare look up at Alice's face.

“...Sorry for getting too carried away.”

“Whoosh!” a little air could be heard rushing out. It was the sound of a Dr. Pepper can being opened. Following that was Alice's unexpectedly gentle voice.

“It's fine. That's your job!”

“...Eh?”

I lifted my head. The stars were no longer to be seen in Alice's eyes, just a white moonlight at the cusp of dawn.

“Us NEETs are too used to not knowing what to do, and too used to thinking that all will be fine if we do this. A car without a steering wheel needs a rear view mirror.”

Then isn't it useless even if there's a rear view mirror? I wondered, but I nodded silently.

“One day—one day, I might be able to break out of this prison, overcome the tall walls I built up, and step out to the vast lands without having to protect anything. Until that day arrives, only you—”

Alice swallowed her words, and I still remained silent.

“Just take it that I didn't say anything,” Alice shook her head, and wrapped herself in the blanket as she turned her back on me. The tapping of the keyboard again separated us.

“So what do we do once we find Hanada Masaru? Any way other than to hand him over to the Huangs?”

Alice did not answer immediately as she merely gulped down an entire can of Dr. Pepper. The gulping heard from her throat seemed to change the tense atmosphere in the office.

“Right now, I don't know. Maybe there's another way.”

The detective lowered her head, putting her fingers together as she said this.

“We know too little about this incident, so there are a few points I can't

accept. Amongst them, the strangest part is Hanada Masaru's motives. Why did he run away? If Huang Xiao Ling's words are to be trusted, Hanada Masaru's murder was on accident, right?”

“Uu...”

That was the case.

A man acting as a bodyguard shot an intruder, and unfortunately killed Huang Xiang Yu who protected that intruder. If this statement was correct, Hanada Masaru's sin was not unforgivable, but taking the two corpses away would be really suspicious. Was it because he ran away that others suspected him, and wanted his head, and even his daughter Min-san got involved? Why run away?

“Maybe...even if it's out of carelessness, the mafia will continue to persist until the very end, so he can only run away?”

“Maybe, but that's just a guess. Anyway, the truth lies in Hanada Masaru himself, and we have to find him. Listen, our aim is ultimately to prevent master's marriage, and there's no need to settle the entire incident. We just need master to understand that she doesn't have to oblige with the Huangs.”

Dejected, I sat on the floor in front of the bed. So that's it, that's how it was. In that case, we needed to know the truth, and then we figure out the rest once we sort everything out.

“In other words, once we find Hanada Masaru, the real battle follows. Right now, we don't know who the enemy really is, and even Hanada Masaru himself may be on the same side as us...”

I nodded firmly.

Right, there's a chance the Hanadas will be reunited! I suddenly thought. But does Min-san really want to see her dad, or not? She likes to act tough aft all. However, Hanada Masaru had a promise with his daughter. In April, when he slipped back to 'Hanamaru', I saw the words he left us. “Next time, let me try out the ice cream you made as well.”

Finally, I thought of a future development that might be a little better, and my lips could not help but curl into a smile. Min-san probably wanted to let her dad taste her ramen, and not just the ice cream. Maybe she might even tell him that

she found a reliable partner who would make ramen with her? No, I seemed to be imagining too much. But if this keeps up...

“What? Why are you leering away?”

Alice's voice caused me to cover my mouth in shock.

“Ah! Just had a thought, the one who'll ask everything from Hanada Masaru, might be Hiro.”

“Hm? Why's that?”

“Eh? No, well, you see, didn't Hiro just say that Min-san's dad will be his sparring partner in the future?”

“Speaking of which, he seemed to have mentioned it before. What does that mean? Does Hiro have some grudge with Hanada Masaru?”

Dumbfounded, I stared at Alice. Right, this girl seemed to be very dull about this aspect, I guess?

“Eh, erm, anyway, that's it. 'Dad, please hand your daughter to me!' or 'who'll marry his daughter to someone like you!' and something like that...”

Speaking of which, Hiro himself never admitted that he was serious.

Alice was dumbfounded, her mouth agape for a while, and then, she sighed with much reluctance.

“That's an exaggeration. A daughter doesn't belong to a dad! And no matter what Hiro thinks of master, eh, no matter how much he likes her, he doesn't intend to get married with her, right? That guy's an unanchored playboy by nature.”

“Bu-but he started work recently, and it seems that he was already learning how to make ramen for a long time already. I'm thinking that this, well, he intends to run the ramen shop along with Min-san?”

Alice was dumbstruckt, unable to say anything.

“...Hiro? Umm...impossible...no, but...”

All kinds of inexplicable emotions were flashing on Alice's childish face.

“Erm Alice, don't tell me, that you don't know Hiro's serious about Min-san?”

“Hm? Wh-what are you saying!? I knew that already! I could tell from his demeanour!”

For some reason, there was some obvious panic in Alice's answer. She should have known about this, right? She knew Hiro for a longer time than I did. Tetsu-senpai and Major, and even Yondaime never showed much shock. Was it because nobody was shocked about this? Speaking of which, I suddenly remembered something. When Min-san was attacked by the yakuza and got hurt, I remembered Hiro panicking, right? Maybe there had been many similar cases of such incidents.

“In that case, why hasn't there been any development between those two?”

“Development? What do you mean?”

“Haven't they known each other for a long time? If he likes master, can't he just confess to her? Don't you find Hiro to be a little useless?”

“Hm? U-uu?”

“Does the one being crushed on not know anything at all? Even though they were together for a long well...”

“Mmmmmm...”

“And they're still buddies! They probably assisted each other in many ways, not just in work alone, but if she didn't realize her buddy's feelings for her, isn't that too much? Eh, is it that Min-san's very sharp when she is, but very dull at boy girl relationships. What's wrong Alice? Your face's red.”

Alice's fingertips were quivering, and it appeared that she was crushing the empty can of Dr. Pepper. However, because of her feeble strength, the can showed nary a budge. And at that moment, Alice suddenly threw the empty can in her hand right at me.

“D-do you have the right to talk about others like that?”

What's with that? I hurriedly ducked my head as I evacuated to the back of the fridge.

“Someone without senses like you can't determine the difference between a male peacock and a female, and you're gleefully talking about relationships

between men and women? Unforgivable!”

“I-I get you! That's not something I should be yapping about, but you don't have to be so angry, right? This has nothing to do with you.”

“You're saying that it has nothing to do with me?”

“...Probably not?”

“Uuuuu, fo-forget about it!”

Alice turned her face to the monitor on the screen, and the hill of plushies fell.

“Anyway, I'm going to go through a long battle of endurance on the internet. Get out and stop disturbing my work!”

“Do you have to be so agitated?'

“Our opponent's Huang Xiao Ling, the developer of the Zodiac Group's Security system.”

Alice's voice was rather agitated, her eyes flickering with dangerous excitement. One of the monitors right in front of her showed the portal site of the Zodiac group, the Chinese Astrological Signs that signified the group's name. The logo of the website was showing different signs based on the month, and right at this point, it was Libra. I was already well acquianted with it. It was said that there was a daily increase in the number of people using this site as a search engine, currently closing in on yahoo and google.

It's true that till this point, Alice was invincible when it came to the internet, and only in this case did she finally meet a formidabole opponent. If the other party was deliberately hiding some message, it would likely be a troublesome one.

In any case, and I started to doubt, if Xiao Ling-san already knew Hanada Masaru's whereabouts, what was the reason for her witholding it from us? If she told us directly, the matter would have been a lot easier, and we would be able to help Hanada Masaru. Thinking about this, I started to wonder if Xiao Ling-san really didn't know anything.

“Enough. Stop thinking too much and do what you're supposed to do.” Alice seemed a little peeved as she said that. “Also, listen up. I'll keep reminding you

this. You might end up dealing with more than Huang Xiao Ling. The opponent is the Chinese mafia. We don't know what'll happen if they got their eyes on you. That dangerous man especially, Huang Hong Lei, don't ever get near him.”

“Right. Got it.”

I heaved a sigh, and dragged my feet out of the office. It was the night of a slightly breezy early winter, but due to the frigid cold in the office and the difference in temperature outside, I felt as though I was surrounded in a warm sense of security. Far away, I could see the bright lights of the skyscrapers in fron the of the station. It was late.

I went down the emergency staircase to the back door of the kitchen, and just so happened to encounter Min-san moving the beer crate out. There were the sounds of drunk customers in the shop, and Hiro being a listener. I nodded to Min-san, and intended to step on the bicycle. We made a decision during the meeting not to let Min-san know that the NEET agency would be taking action, because if she knew, she would be utterly furious, and would yell at us, why are you getting involved with the mafia, you brats.

However, Min-san put down the beer crate by the wall, and turned to call me.

“What are you plannin again?”

I held the handles of the bicycle, rooted to the ground. This is bad.

“Why are you anxious to get away? You don't want to answer my question?”

I was about to get onto the seat of the bicycle, only for my belt to be grabbed from behind.

“N-nothing? Nothing at all!?”

Even I realized that nobody would believe such nonsense. Min-san dragged me to the back door, grabbing me by the collar.

“Those useless guys, and even Sou came by. How's it possible that there's nothing? Is it something to do with the Huangs again? Don't you guys ever learn? Listen, they're the Hong Kong mafia, you know? They'll chop limbs and tongues without warning, without flinching!”

“Erm, well.”

Min-san's furious glare was right in front of me, and I could only think of what to say. She would definitely find out, so I guess I should tell her mostly truth? Just hide the critical matters first.

But before I spoke, I had to be sure.

“...Did you hear anything from Hiro? Well, the request this time is by Hiro, so I have an obligation to keep it a secret for him.”

Min-san glanced aside, through the back door that was ajar, at the kitchen. Hiro, wearing a black apron around his waist, was drinking with the regular customers. I didn't know if he noticed me, or if he pretended not to.

“That guy never said anything.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I expected that.”

Hiro probably wouldn't be that careless,

“Though he did tell me to get married with him.”

“Ehhh!?”

“Saying that he'll run the ramen shop with me forever, and got Alice and Sou involved to woo me. Stop trying to pull a fast one with such unimportant stuff.

Hiro...you're really serious! You were being honest all the way, and she wouldn't believe you. Well, it's an outcome to be expeted, but even you proposal was ignored completely. That's too pitiful. Was that karma for fooling around with the hearts of so many girls?

However, since this was the current situation, I probably knew how to continue. Taking a deep breath to calm myself somewhat, I spoke up again,

“Well actually, he's being completely serious.”

“Hmm?” Min-san frowned.

“Min-san, you're going to be a substitute for the wedding ceremony, right? But that guy called Hong Lei might be using this chance to force a marriage with you. That's why everyone's worried.”

“Are you guys idiots? How's that—” Saying that, Min-san stopped herself.

Then, I saw something very rare. Min-san looked aside, and even curled her lips. Was she embarrassed?

“You probably had an idea about that.”

“No...but that was when we were kids. Back then, Hong Lei and I were still brats in middle school.”

“See, I guessed so.”

“Like that's the case, you idiot.”

I got flickered on the forehead. I couldn't see very well due to the dim lights all around, but I got the feeling Min-san was looking red.

“Me getting married has nothing to do with you guys anyway?”

“Well, you've been taking care of us all this while, so nobody wanted to see you being harassed by some strange guy and be in some unhappy marriage. That's why we needed to investigate in many ways. Like whether he has other women, whether there'll be domestic violence, things like that...”

“That's enough already.”

Min-san pushed my chest heart, and entered the kitchen without looking back.

“I said that they're mafia. Someone died, and my dad's on the run. If you're going to investigate such useless stuff, what'll happen if Hong Lei and his cronies set their eyes on you? Stop butting in!”

Min-san's tone was like a master telling off a pet cat, and I reached out to close the back door, heaving a sigh. It looked like I managed to get through somehow.

I went to the front of the ramen shop, and exchanged looks with Hiro who was moving some ramen out of the shop. He waved at me with a wry smile, and I too raised my hand in return, before stepping firmly on the pedals. The chilly night breeze tickled my neck.

Of course, I did not go home. During the prior meeting, I was assigned only one job, to obtain more information from Xiao Ling-san. Thus, I went up the Meiji Street, towards Shinjuku.

Behind me was a tall standing skyscraper, and the right side was the Shinjuku garden. I cycled for approximately 3 minutes, and a 7 level building appeared at a cross junction with little traffic. All the lights from the 4th level and above were lit, and they looked as mysterious as a UFO floating above. The name of the company was printed on the glass panel, Zodiac.

I parked in front of the building, and took my cellphone up. I wonder if she would be willing to meet at this time.

“How did you obtain my cellphone number?”

Xiao Ling-san's voice stabbed at my ear through the speaker.

“Well, actually, I guess it's better to find some intel that's not really hard to find, and easier to talk about proper business. No, it wasn't me, it's the detective.”

I inadvertently lifted my head, trying to find someone from through the windows. I got the feeling someone was looking down, glaring at me, though I did not tell her that I was at the ground floor.

“Haven't you heard the rumors about the Huangs? This isn't a place where a high school kid can just snoop around!”

It's my job to provide the retorts. I nearly spat out those words, but I guess this person probably wouldn't bother with this lame joke of mine.

“We aren't here to obstruct or influence the Huangs. Please understand!”

There was a deep sigh from the speaker.

“Erm, sorry to disturb at such a late hour, but I'm actually in front of your company. There's something I'll like to request, so I'm wondering if you're available at the moment?”

Saying that, I realized very well that this job was tough to deal with. The one most suited for this job would be Hiro himself, but he could only be asked to be an obedient employee so as not to let Min-san find out, and I was in charge of asking.

“What's wrong? Didn't that kid already reject the request?”

“Actually, you should know where Min-san's dad is now, right?”

“Didn't I say that he didn't tell me?”

She denied it immediately. Unlike me, it looked like everyone knew how to ask. What do I do? Try talking to her again? Erm...

“Well, as you know, that detective's a hacker, and she managed to hack into your cellphone and obtained the call record from Hanada Masaru-san.”

After saying that, I immediately regretted it. Nobody would record a phone conversation, right? That would certainly be seen through.

However, something unexpected happened. Xiao Ling-san did not speak up for another 2 seconds, and clearly she was startled by my bluff.

“How's it possible to record a phone conversation? Stop spouting nonsense.”

Did she really record the converation? If Alice was able to hack into her phone, we'll find some clues. After hearing those words from me, I guess she probably deleted it? Alice at this point should be tussling with the security system, so I'll continue talking. I summoned my courage, saying,

“How about you consider exchanging information with us? Regarding Hanada Masaru-san, I know some things even you don't know about, Xiao Ling-san. That man came back to 'Hanamaru' this April, and said a few things.”

Those words were completely made up, but Hanada Masaru did show up a few times in Spring, and Xiao Ling-san knew about that. Within this lie was 80% fact.

At that moment, while looking up, I spotted a figure at the windowside of the 6th level. Due to the backlight, I could not see clearly, but the profile appeared to be female, and she's holding the phone by her ear. I could even sense her lowering her head, looking down at me.

A sigh came from the cellphone, followed by a hushed voice.

“Continue on in the phone. There's nothing much to answer since what I know isn't any more than what I didn't.”

Baited. So, did I realize my true potential as a con artist? For a moment, I was really amazed, and then I clenched a fist and punched my thigh to recover, switching my phone to the left hand.

“Before exchanging iintel, tell me your group's motives. What do you intend to

do? Will it not affect the Huangs at all?”

I gulped. Right, this was the point, the hardest one. Alice mentioned this in the meeting. How much information you want to inform Huang Xiao Ling of, that'll depend on your talent as a con artist.

“Actually, I want to know more about your motives, Xiao Ling-san.”

I hushed my voice as I said this. I really could not help but feel that it was inconvenient not to be able to see her expression at this moment, but at the same time, she couldn't see mine.

“Alice and I couldn't interpret your feelings, since you don't seem worried that Hanada Masaru will be killed by the mafia. When you made the request, you never mentioned the need for us to help hiim, did you? I don't know what your true intents are? You probably don't want Masaru-san to get caught, right?”

Following that, Xiao Ling-san began to ponder. This rally of guessing each other's feelings really drains the brain cells. Assuming that she already knew where Hanada Masaru was, there might be a few reasons why she wouldn't tell us, and the most definite reason would be that she didn't trust us. If she told us, there might be a chance someone would slip up, and the mafia would obtain the news. However, if she didn't trust us in the first place, why did she come to the detective agency?

“...Masaru-san, he probably won't get caught. Do you know how terrifying were his experiences? Even if all the members in the Huang Coalition is to be mobilized, it'll be useless, probably.”

There was a strange feeling in Xiao Ling-san's voice as she said this. She was quivering slightly due to some uneasiness, but there was a firm conviction. It was really paraoxical.

“There's no need to worry about Masaru-san. I just want to let things develop as he hoped, and not get Ming Li in some misfortune.”

She was simply repeating what she said in the detective agency.

I closed my eyes. Surely this person was hiding something, but her saying that it was for Min-san's sake, that she hoped to respect Masaru-san's wishes were both probably true.

Let's trust her. Or else there would not be any developments.

“Understood.” I continued. “Now then, I'll state our aim.”

I opened my eyes, searching the darkness, took a deep breath, and thought of how I wanted to start off.

“Your older brother—Hong Lei-san intended to have Min-san take over for his murdered fiancee—Xiang Yu-san. Did you hear that?”

“Yes, I heard from Hong Lei.”

“It appeared Hong Lei-san used to have some feelings for Min-san. Is this still true? Erm, in other words.”

“Will he really use this as an excuse to get married with Ming Li for real? I'm wondering if that's the case too.”

Even his little sister feels this way too? So our guesses were right?

“Erm, is such a plan really plausible? I heard that it's a politcal marriage between the main family and the branch family. Is it really alright to have someone be a substitute for such important wedding?”

“Wen Li-san—Ming Li's mother was the daughter the Dragon Head doted on. Back then, when it was known that she wanted to marry Masaru-san, it was said that the Dragon Head sent a few assassins after him.”

My jaw near dropped when I heard that. Doting on a daughter that much would be another level, right?

“However, it appeared Masaru-san took down those assassiins, and finally gained the Dragon Head's conssent. After Ming Li was born, the main family in Hong Kong wanted to take her back to raise her. So...I'm guessing the Dragon head would be really delighted with this.”

I could not help but sigh. That man called Hong Lei probably anticipated matters to such a level.

“If Min-san's to be married with your brother, I don't think she'll be happy, right?”

“About that, I don't know. I'm guessing it's up to Ming Li.”

“No, Min-san—”

At that moment, I recallled.

Before leaving the ramen shop, I had a little chat with Min-san, and mentioned the possibility of her getting married with Hong Lei.

Min-san never said that she didn't want to get married with Hong Lei.

“Masaru-san once asked me to see if Ming Li has any suitable partner, whether she's living a happy life.”

“Haa...”

So that's why Xiao Ling-san went to ask Hiro directly? That Masaru-san killed someone, and is on the run, yet he's still able to worry about this, I could not help but wonder. Maybe this is the heart of a parent. Speaking of which, there's a likely chance that he won't be able to see his daughter again.

Min-san's happiness.

That—should be up to Min-san to decide. Objectively, Hiro's in a disadvantage right now. One side's Min-san's childhood friend and the boss of a startup, and wholeheartedly devoted to Min-san (I guess). The other one's a gigolo, the number of female he caused to cry in triple digits.

I continued to slam my thigh. Wake up already. What stupid things am I thinking of now? The one requesting this time is Hiro! I don't need to think of whether Hong Lei can bring happiness to Min-san, and I don't need to worry about Hiro's gigolo antics having a high chance of making Min-san unhappy. The important thing now is to get Xiao Ling-san to trust us, to tell us the truth and help us.

I gulped, and said,

“Actually, we're looking for Hanada Masaru-san.”

I said it. There was no room for me to regret at all.

“It's unreasonable to force a marriage because of a debt her dad left behind. Right now, Min-san has her own life. That's why we intend to bring Hanada Masaru back, and have him settle the issue he caused.”

I paused, waiting for Xiao Ling-san to speak up, but she didn't say anything.

“In other words, we're on the same side as the Huangs, and we won't get in your way. But—”

Taking a deep breath, I continued,

“Our ultimate aim is the same as yours, Xiao Ling-san. We definitely don't wish for any unhappiness to happen to Min-san.”

Saying till this point, I went silent again.

The cars and motorcyles continued to race down the Shinjuku street, and the exhaust gases tickled my neck along with the icy night breeze. By the time I realized it, the figure at the windowside had vanished, and the lights on the 7th and 4th levels vanished.

In the end, I stated most of the truth. I thought.

After a long while, I heard Xiao Ling-san mutter,

“How are you kids going to find Masaru-san? He might not be in Japan anymore.”

“Xiao Ling-san, if you're willing to reveal what happened at the scene, or the vehicle that was used in the escape.”

“Don't be silly. If any outsider is to know of this, Hong Lei will definitely kill me.”

And so, the call ended.

Not willing to go through the Meiji street that was filled with exhaust gases again, I chose to cycle slowly through the Gaien West path. I decided not to think about it, but I had a feeling that if it was Hiro, he might be able to get Xiao Ling-san to help. However, Xiao Ling-san's right in that the mafia intended to handle this murder case themselves. If any information was revealed to the outsiders, that Huang Hong Lei would not spare even his own sister. It was really unwise to request her of this.

Right when I could vaguely see the massive shadow of the National Olympic

Stadium on my left, my cellphone rang suddenly. I parked at the side of the pedestrian path, and found an anonymous number shown on the screen. Who's calling?

“...Hello?”

“...Are you the high school kid at the detective's place?”

The voice from the phone was as raspy as rusted metals rubbing each other, and I could hear immediately that it was Hanada Masaru. Why call me on my phone?

“Ho-how did you—where are you now?”

The sound of the bicycle toppling cut off my words. Now's not the time to panic. Calm down. I reached my trembling hand to press the record button.

“Listen. Leave the interaction with Hong Lei to Hinamura Souichiro. This isn't something to involve him with in the first place, but that guy's too obvious... ”

“Ho-how did you know of Yondaime's past?”

“The Huang Coalition has eyes around 'Hanamaru', and they saw Hinamura and the others going in and out of the agency. You guys are being too careless here!”

How? How's it possible for him to know all this so well? Did he just contact Xiao Ling-san?

“Now that he's seen, forget about it. Let Hinamura meet Huang Hong Lei. Have him say that he'll fully assist in looking for me, and tell them everything. For the time being, that will make sure they won't get suspicious.”

“What are you intending to do?”

The phone line was suddenly cut off, and a ringing continued on for a while. No matter how I tried moving my phone away from my ears, or I took a deep breath, that sound never vanished. I looked down, and found that the wheels of my bicycle were spinning loosely. I stepped on the pedal to stop it, and dialed Alice's number.

“H-Hanada Masaru just called my phone!”

The detective gasped, and immediately hung up. Hanada Masaru knew of Alice, and probably wouldn't be so stupid to have her investigate the GPS signal, but just in case, there was a chance.

I lifted my bicycle, and slowly stepped on the pedal. At the same time, I tried reaching for the swirling doubts lingering in my mind, only to find that it was in chaos. What was Hanada Masaru intending to do? Why give us suggestions? Did he wish to be caught? Impossible. If that was the case, he might as well show up intead.

Right, the first time Hanada Masaru called over, he did tell Min-san to 'wait for another week'. What's he doing now? Raise enough money and get far away? Does he intend to use the NEET detective agency to mess up the mafia's sights. You got to be kidding! I really had the urge to say that to him. I don't know what you're doing, but it's because you never showed up that things aren't developing at all! Please show up and settle this, so that Min-san won't have to worry again.

Suddenly, I thought of a possibility.

Was Hanada Masaru running around because the reason of that killing wasn't due to carelessness?

It was just a baseless feeling, but if that was the case, what we're doing right now would be making the worst case scenario even worse, and might even end up trapping Min-san further until she's unable to escape.

I exerted strength as I pedaled, accelerating the bicycle. The chilly bright grazed my ears, but it could not erase this chill in my heart.

Two days later, after school—

On that day, I did not pass by the east entrance of the station where 'Hanamaru' was, but instead, I went west.

On both sides of the slope filled with many pedestrians, there were office buildings and all kinds of restaurants mixed among the many random buildings. There were already a few shops pedalling for businesses, probably because it was almost dusk. I tried to avoid the crowd as I pedaled hard up the slope, and at the Tokyu department store standing majestically afar, I turned at the left.

My destination was a short building. The first floor was a small convenience store, and the shop front was covered with white and pink artificial flowers that were obvious from afar. The 3rd floor of this building was the office of Hirasaka-gumi.

“Good work today, Aniki!”

“You've worked hard, Aniki!”

I opened the metal door and entered the office, finding some gnarling, savage looking men inside who suddenly stood up to greet me. We're about to enter the sseason of leaves wilting, yet they're all wearing short sleeved black T-shirts.

The Hirasaka-gumi was a gang of delinquents on this street. The leader, Yondaime, and a few other important members were at the age where they could no longer be called youths, and it's really uncomfortable hearing these people call me aniki, when I'm just a 16-year-old high school boy. Rather than being used to it recently, I guess I gave up.

“Eh? Where's Yondaime?” I scanned the office. There was a glass table in the middle of two sofas facing each other, right in the middle was a clunky table, and there were some framed calligraphy writings on the wall. This really was an impeccable gang office, but the most important leader wasn't around. In the study inside?

“Sou-san's off to get a car.”

Answering me was a hunk in a black T-shirt who's probably above 2m tall, nicknamed Pole.

“Aniki, are you two going somewhere to beat people up today?”

“No no no, we're not going to fight.”

If they knew that we're headed to the house of a Chinese mafia young lord, these guys would definitely be utterly mistaken and get ridiculously excited. Thus, I decided not to say anything more.

The reason was due to the call from Hanada Masaru two days ago. We took the initiative to request Huang Hong Lei to conduct a collaboration in the investigations. The risks were great, but it was worth a gamble—so Alice said.

Thus, we had Yondaime call Xiao Ling-san. While I was feeling worried through it all, things got negotiated quickly.

However, I really could not shake off my doubts about Hanada Masaru. Why was he guiding us? To use us as a smokescreen for his escape?

I was really curious about this, but I decided to follow to Huang Hong Lei's house. Of course, I did not tell Alice about this. The meeting time was 4.30pm, about time then. I was feeling so tense, I was gasping for breath.

At this moment, I found a book on the desk, and the title was 'Crash Course! Wedding Ceremony Manners'. That was really a title that invited uneasiness.

“...What's this?”

I actually asked, using up all my luck. Pole answered with a grin on his face.

“Everyone's discussing about what to say at the ceremoney.”

“E-erm, wedding ceremony? Whose?”

“Who else? Master and Hiro's, of course! We heard it all. It's on the 3rd next month!”

Where did they hear that from? And how did they end up misunderstanding like that?

“Alright, you guys, repeat what you just thought of and have Aniki hear them out!”

“Right! We'll train our manliness here!” One of the guys in black T-shirt opened a folded piece of paper.

“Ehh, congrats on getting married, Hiro-san, Min-san. People say that there's a need for three 'bags'. First, you need the 'stomach bag'.” “A stomach's needed even if you aren't married!” “Next, full black bags.” “Your T-shirts are already completely black!” “Finally, Uniqlo.” “Why are you helping with promotion here!?”

“Isn't there the three 'Saka' version?” Once those words were said, I decided not to retort anymore. If this kept up, it'll be endless.

“Three 'Saka'? Which three?” Pole asked.

“The first is Hirasaka, right?” “That's referring to us!” “What's next?” “Akasaka?” “Right, there's a lot of weddings held there!” “Right, what's the last one?” “Otokozaka?”

“Definitely not Otokozaka!” This is bad, I instinctively retorted again. Stuff that are on hiatus or completed are taboos to wedding. Speaking of which, nobody said anything about holding a marriage!

“What are you guys yapping about?”

The savior's voice entered the office along with the sound of the metal door being opened.

“Sou-san, good work.”

“Good work there!”

I turned my head around, and saw Yondaimedressed in a blue suit walk over to me, rounding around the sofa. The white bleached hair caused his savage glare to intensify by another 30 percent or so, and I cringed back in shock, only able to nod at him timidly. This time, we weren't going to play. Better maintain some tension.

“Do you have time to bother with those idiots? Hurry up and move!”

The glittering, posh body of a Mercedes Benz CL was parked in the narrow lane in front of the building.

“Wh-what's with this?”

Yondaime had a few foreign cars that ranged from pricey to cheap, but this was the first time I saw him drive a benz. Really, this car really was a dissonance from the alley and Yondaime himself. It felt as disgusting as having foie gras with sushi.

“I'll only drive this kind of car when dealing with such annoying stuff.” Yondaime said as he shoved me from the back into the co-passenger seat, while he went for the driver seat. This annoying thing he's referring to, I wonder if that referred to him having to show off his capability as a yakuza gang, and not letting himself be underestimated?

“...Having you on the co-passenger seat is enough to have anyone looking

down on us even if I'm driving a Porshe or Rolls Royce, right?”

I feel the same. Sorry.

Yondaime stepped on the accelerator, and the car immediately sank, instantly rushing out to the road outside.

The Huangs' villa was located in a quiet part of Shimo-Ochiai, a unique, luxurious mansion bult with hundreds of thousands of flat tiles stacked together. It was also built on a slope, and one had to wonder how many floors there were. The sibilings Xiao Ling-san and Huang Hong Lei lived alone in this place, but it would not be strange to say that this place was large enough to house the entire clan.

“Are you really coming along?”

Yondaime asked me at the entrance,

“You definitely came here without telling Alice, didn't you? That girl's going to bawl her eyes out if she knows you sneaked into the den of a Chinese mafia.”

“Ehh, well...that's true.”

Don't approach Huang Hong Lei. Alice did warn me harshly before.

“I'm scared of a future mafia boss remembering my appearance! But I look like a high school kid, and he'll probably think of me as your lackey, Yondaime. I guess I probably won't be in any danger?”

“What lackey? I seriously have no idea if you're either scared or reckless.”

“My uneasiness is directed at Hanada Masaru. I just find that there's something I couldn't accept, and I don't know what he's planning anyway. If we're going to negotiate with Huang Hong Lei, that means involving him, right? We don't know what he's thinking. You don't mind about that yourself, Yondaime?”

“What's there to mind? No matter whose thoughts are they, we just need to make it work, right? Besides, if we don't do this, we're at our wits end. Alice couldn't hack into that woman's phone, right?”

“You're right...”

In any case, I just couldn't relax. I had a thought, that if I could personally hear what Huang Hong Lei had to say, I might be able to grasp Hanada Masaru's plan. That was why I came along.

In other words, I completely directed my attention on Hanada Masaru, and completely underestimated Huang Hong Lei.

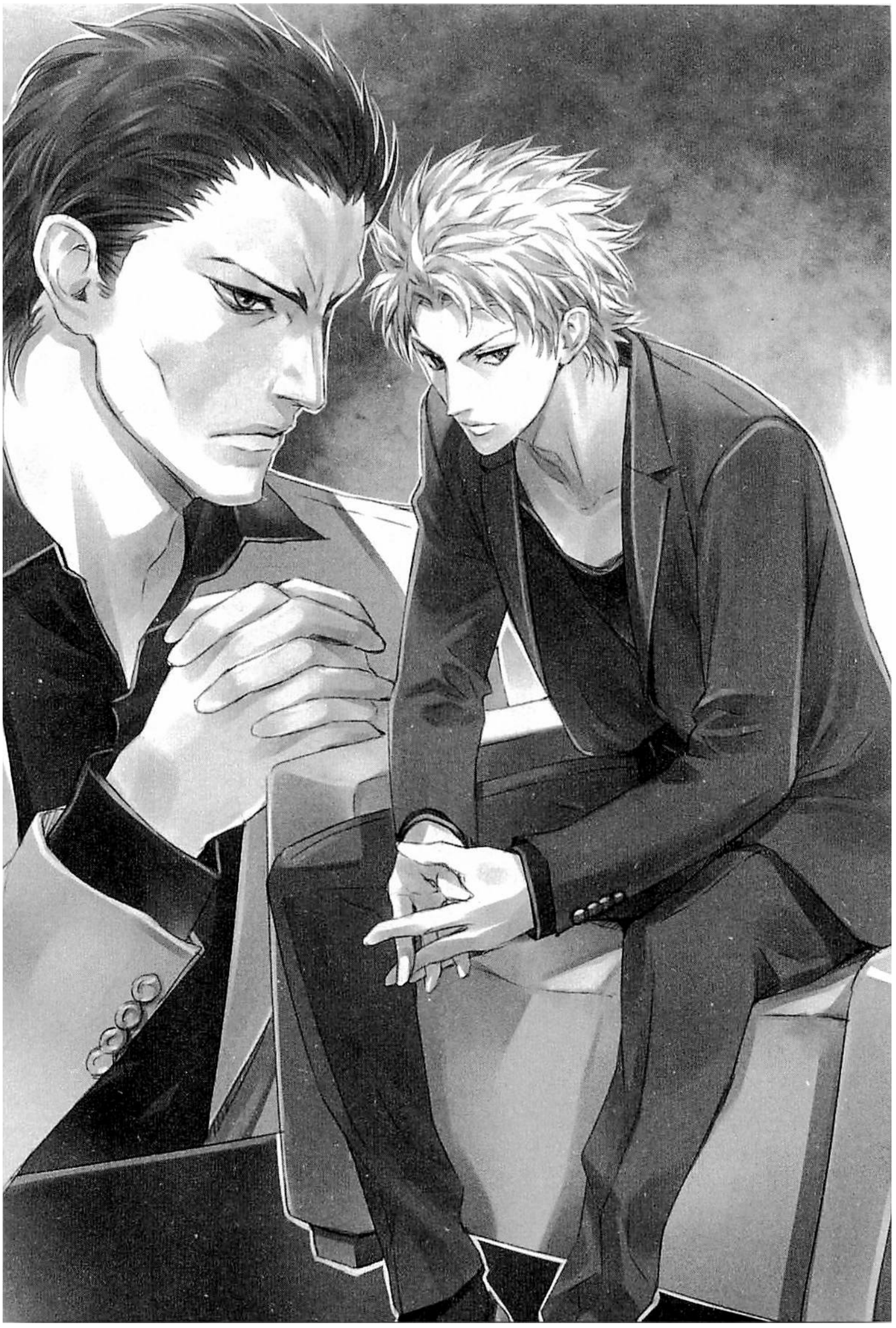
Yondaime glanced aside at me, glaring, and with a snort, he pressed the intercom button. I could only sense the numerous surveillance cameras hidden somewhere watching all over us.

Surprisingly, it was Huang Hong Lei himself who personally came to invite us. He had that slick black hair combed back, the color of his hair akin to iron. The deep, wine red shirt under the white suit had three buttons unbuttoned, revealing his chest. This was the second time I saw a man who's so suited to wearing white. However, the white on Hiro was of a warm glow, while the white on this person was a chilling, flickering light that was like a blade. Huang Hong Lei glared at Yondaime, the Benz, and me in turn, before telling us “come in.” Why did he not call in his subordinates or servants to open the door? Feeling startled, I followed him into the mansion. Speaking of which, did he not mind that I came over while wearing my school uniform?

Unexpectedly, the interior of the mansion was of Western furbishing. The waiting room too was the same, as there was a beige carpet on the floor, and a simple volume sofa was placed in the middle The surroundings were plants for viewing, and it was a simple yet classy Western-styled room. One of the 4 walls was a slab of glass, and I could see a garden of green grass carpet and potted Azalea. I originally assumed that the walls would have vibrant colored dragons, or that it would be a place filled with mafia goons. Unexpectedly, it was just an ordinary house, I guess?

“Is it that rare?”

Huang Hong Lei asked with an intimidating voice, nearly jolting me from shock.



“You aren't here just to sightsee, are you?”

He sat on the sofa opposite us, his sharp glare on me for half a second before he turned to Yondaime.

“Er-erm.”

I would be fine keeping my mouth shut, but I just had to yap and explain.

“I just feel that this isn't a place a Chinese would live in. There's no decoration on the walls, and the lights are normal...”

“Do you Japanese all live in ninja houses? Enough with the crap.”

Hong Lei's words struckt me right in the chest, and I could only shrink back into the sofa. After that, Hong Lei didn't say anything else to me. I'll leave the rest to Yondaime then! I guess I'll just shut up and pretend to be a lackey here.

“Hinamura Souichiro. I suppose you've heard of me from Xiao Ling-san.”

To be honest, this was the first time I heard Yondaime speak to anyone else with a respectful tone, and I sincerely hoped it was the last time. His tone and accent were not really that strange, but hearing it gave me a feeling of accidentally gulping down coffee powder. My mouth and throat felt really uncomfortable.

Hong Lei narrowed his eyes as he sized up Yondaime.

“Enoguh with that stupid polite tone.” Hearing Hong Lei say this, I inadvertently widened my eyes, “I find you to be an eyesore anyway, and since I'll figure out a way to crush you, let's save the hassle and just speak normally.”

Yondaime heaved a sigh.

“Well, guess you knew about me.”

“Having set up a business on such a scale, of course I would have made my investigations.”

“That's an honor. I alreayd knew what kind of person you are, so let's stop wasting time and get to the main point as soon as possible. I don't want to work together with you again, so better to settle this as soon as possible.”

I overheard the conversation from beside Yondaime. What's with these two?

Why do they look like they want to brawl upon meeting each other for the first time? Well, it's true that they couldn't treat each other as friends...

“I heard of it somewhat from Xiao Ling today.” Hong Lei spoke up first, “And then? Why are you guys going to help find Masaru?”

Yondaime suddenly nudged my shoulder with his own. Eh? He wants me to talk? He got to be kidding! I turned my head at Yondaime, who glared at me as though he wanted to gnaw me to death. I frantically turned forward, and didn't expect even Hong Lei to be staring at me. I want to go home...

No, but, he'll be suspicious if I don't say a single thing. Guess I got no choice here.

“...Erm, well, we got a member called Hiro. You know, right?”

I stammered, my mind again recalled what I should take note of.

First, Hong Lei probably knew that Xiao Ling-san came to 'Hanamaru' on that day. But I can't let Hong Lei know what Xiao Ling-san requested, or else the matter of her receiving contact from Hanada Masaru would be revealed. So, I just needed to tell him that Xiao Ling-san went to 'Hanamaru' that night because she was worried about Min-san. Alice, Min-san and I never heard the content of the call from Hanada Masaru, and never heard that he would call back a week later. Right. Most importantly, I couldn't let Hong Lei know that I received a call from Hanada Masaru. If I let it slip, I don't know what'll happen to me, and I might be interrogated, and my brain might get dug out.

As for anything else—as for what Hanada Masaru warned me—I guess I should be honest.

I cautiously began to explain.

Hiro has feelings for Min-san too, and he's worried that you'll try to have her pretend to be the bride before marrying her for real, so he's thinking of some way to prevent it—after I foolishly revealed it all, I realized, in my astonishment, and inadvertently shut up as I lowered my head.

Hong Lei's intentions were merely our guess right now, and I said it to him!

I timidly raised my head, and saw Hong Lei raise a leg over his other one as he

gave me a stoic look. On first glance, he didn't appear to be angry, but he was more terrifying than just angry.

“Hmph. If you think you can bring Masaru back, I'll just give up on Ming Li, right?”

“...Eh?”

“Well, whatever. I already know what you stupid brats are thinking already. But Hinamura, your situation is different. Given your identity, I don't think you'll be bored out of your mind as to play along with these kids? Why must you get involved?”

“This is worldly loyalty. I don't think you understand how the people in this country behave.”

“Hmph.”

Hong Lei again turned to me, and I was so nervous, sweat was trickling out between my fingers.

“And then? How much have you learned? Since you know the information we have, you have to show your cards.”

Hong Lei suddenly leaned towards us, shocking me enough to lean back, and I found my chest being flattened. Why ask me? Please just continue to talk with Yondaime!

“E-erm, anyway, there's not much news we have that we can report to you...”

“Don't underestimate me now. Hinamura, the other hoodlums, and even you're taking actions o openly. Obviously, you got some news on Masaru, don't you?”

“Eh?”

“I know that you aren't just some ordinary high school student.”

“I'm really a normal high school kid! Just as you're seeing!”

“Are you intending to pretend not to know anything about Hello Corporation and the Tahara-gumi incident?”

I was at a loss of words.

On Spring this year, a Thai girl barged into the NEET detective agency with 2 hundred million yen in tow, and the incident that originated from this event ended up folding due to an auxiliary group of a certain gang.

This isn't good. I really shouldn't have come along. I guess I was too naive to think that I could pretend to be a lackey. What do I do? I couldn't just lie to him, and besides, my lying skills are atrocious to a point of despair. My own voice echoed earnestly in my mind. I had to say some truth.

“Around April or so—”

Saying that, I was praying that my voice could reach out successfully.

“—Masaru-san once sneaked in to 'Hanamaru'. I guess he had some plastic surgery on, and even Min-san couldn't recognize him. However, he left a lot of ingredients that could be used for new soup making, and even wrote the address of the importing shop. These import shops probably involve where Masaru-san's hiding now. I guess that's something you don't know?”

I lowered my head and peeked up at Hong Lei's eyes. There was no lie mixed in, but that information was probably useless. However, he didn't know this.

“That's all?”

With Hong Lei interrogating me, I could barely nod my stiff jaw.

“Once you get back, send me a mail.”

I could only hold in a sigh of relief to prevent Hong Lei from noticing. Then, Hong Lei drew out something from his pocket, and threw it onto the table.

“First, for you.”

Two photos that were attached together with a clip.

“Photos of Xiang Yu, and her lover.”

Photos of their corpses? I was taken aback, but Yondaime reached out for them without a second thought. In the end, both photos were simply normal head photos. It was to be expected. The corpses were taken away by Hanada Masaru, and there was no way any photos could be left behind.

Huang Xiang Yu really didn't seem similar to Min-san or Xiao Ling-san in

appearance. She's pretty too, but there was a sick gloominess to her. I felt that she would be seated on a Wisteria chair in the concubine quarters, with the female attendants serving her as she lamented “His Highness hasn't been seeing me recently.”

“Ah...erm. It might be a little late, but, well, my condolences.”

Suddenly, I recalled that she was dead, and so, I shrank my head back, trying to express some grief.

“Enough with that nonsense. The other guy's a lowlife called Umeda Kouji.”

Yondaime took out the second photograph, and it appeared to be ripped off from a driver's license, for the photo was terribly taken. Umeda Kouji's hair was dyed blond, and though he should be a young guy, his skin was rough, and his lips were drooping. His eyes alone looked slender, and did not seem to match his other organs.

“So this lowlife barged in to snatch your fiancee back—and they were shot by Hanada Masaru. Is that it?”

Yondaime said as he lifted his eyes from the photo.

“Right. I'll show you the scene. Follow me.”

Hong Lei got to his feet, while Yondaime and I followed suit. We passed through a simple, wide corridor, down several flight of stairs that were not too steep, and brought to a villa that should be located at the bottom of the slope. It was eerily quiet, and I could not sense anyone else around. I recalled the scenes after entering the house, and certainly, I didn't see anyone other than Huang Hong Lei.

“I don't think I saw a single houseservant or member here?” Yondaime asked. Huang Hong Lei merely snorted.

“This isn't an office. How can I let my subordinates in? The fewer people that enter, the safer it is, and I can take care of myself. Xiang Yu said she doesn't like to see the gang members, and later, she was left here. That's why the Dragon Head said to hire a bodyguard to protect her, and hired Masaru.”

I see. So the granddaughter of the boss was a young lady in her youth, and I

guess she probably didn't wish for anyone to bring guns, walk around in black suits, wielding some green dragon blade or having bald heads with scary looks lurking around?

“Over here.”

Hong Lei stopped in front of a simple cream white door, and turned around. The door opened, and inside was a luxurious bedroom as fine as a hotel suite. Opposite the bed was an entire glass window, and outside it was an unfurbished garden.

“Where was she attacked? Doesn't the room look neat here?” Yondaime muttered.

“Obviously the place was cleaned up, right?”

Hong Lei took out a photo from his chest pocket, and brought it to us. I guessed. That photo was taken from where we were, and the look in reality seemed to overlap with the disaster that was printed out.

The bed in the photo was covered in blood, and there was a large hole in the glass window, with scattered glass fragments all over the floor.

“It was already like this when I got Xiao Ling's call. Masaru, Xiang Yu, and that Umeda Kouji all vanished. Masaru's car was gone too.”

Hone Lei coldly stated, and put the photo back into his pocket.

“E-erm, do you mind showing that photo? Just to investigate...”

“Don't be stupid. Can you assure that you won't bring it to the police?”

I won't do that—the moment I was about to say those words, Hong Lei's hands flashed by. I could barely see a sharp metallic glint, and Yondaime's arm passing the corner of my eye.

However, while Yondaime intended to grab Hong Lei by the collar, his hand remained frozen in the air. I felt that even his facial muscles were stiff. There was an icy pain spreading on my tongue, and a heavy breath of gastric arose, stuck in my throat.

There were suddenly daggers in Hong Lei's hands, and the blade in the right hand was on Yondaime's neck—

While the blade in the left hand was in my mouth.

If any part above my head moved by a single millimeter, my tongue and inside of my face would have been cut apart. Time seemed to freeze, and I could only hear Hong Lei's hoarse voice.

“Listen up. Once you find Masaru. Report back immediately! Try any funny thing, and I'll kill you.”

I returned to 'Hanamaru' alone, and the curtains were pulled up, indicating that business was running as usual. I could see customers through the opened door, and the laughter of many girls could be heard from within.

Thinking about that blood stained room alone was enough motivation for me to return home. The taste of the dagger lingered in my mouth, and my tongue got cut; it bled. Thinking back about that moment, I felt as though my throat got wringed out.

Alice was right. I shouldn't have just showed up so proudly. No, Hong Lei already knew of my identity, it seemed. I guess maybe it would probably end up as how it is now. I don't know.

It appeared like it would be impossible to gain a foothold over the Hong Kong triad. Even if we did find Hanada Masaru, we could only hand him over to the Huangs, and even if did nab him, it appeared Huang Hong Lei had no intention on giving up Min-san. What's the meaning of our actions till this point then?

However, the situation had developed to a point where we could no longer stop. By now, Yondaime probably spread the information of the escape vehicle he obtained from Hong Lei. Even though the official numbers in Hirasaka-gumi was less than 30, if Yondaime was willing, mobilizing all the NEETs in the neighborhood would not be a problem. Furthermore, his territory was not limited to this area, but even the entire Yamanote line.

Maybe we could really find Hanada Masaru.

I slowly parked my bicycle in between the buildings, kicked the stand down, and heard the sound of the back door opening behind me.

“Fujishima-kun, welcome back! You kept us waiting!”

I turned back to see a girl dressed in uniform rush out. The brown short hair fluttered vibrantly. It was Ayaka.

“...I'm back...what are you waiting for?”

“You don't look energetic at all. What's going on? You look like the entire world has no need for you or something.”

“Thanks for the detailed explanation...” and she basically got it correct.

“It's fine. I need you anyway, Fujishima-kun. Come in!”

Just like that, I was dragged into the kitchen. There were so many girls from our class that the corridor was filled; Min-san continued to flip the wok in front of the furnace, looking gloomy, while Hiro was washing the dishes, a smile remaining on his face.

“Hey, it's impossible even for Narumi! Give up already.”

Min-san frowned as she said to Ayaka.

“Fujishima should be able to accept this, right?” “But even if Fujishima can accept it, it's pointless if we can't sell it to the customers!”

The girls whispered to each other.

“Eh...what's going on?”

“We win you to try it!”

Ayaka suddenly shoved a plate towards me, and a sweet fragrance entered deep within my nostrils. There was some mysterious object on the plate, and it appeared to be some burnt metal smile, currently corroding too.

“...What's this?”

“Fried ice cream.”

“Haa.” Apologize to the ice cream.

“But Min-san won't be able to make it to the first day of the culture festival.”

“Yeah.” On that day, she was forced to participate in Huang Hong Lei's marriage.

“So we don't have a food preparation chef on that day.”

“That's right.”

“In that case, we can only sell food that's heated right before they're served. That's why I thought of ice cream!”

I suddenly felt pain in my neck, and had to hurry out of the kitchen. Sorry Ayaka! I got stabbed in the mouth just a while back. I'm not in the mood for retorts now!

“I heard everything from Yondaime, you idiot!”

I entered the detective agnecy, and Alice's growl came flying at me along with empty cans of Dr. Pepper. All I could do was cup my head.

“What do you think you're doing? You went to Huang Hong Lei's house without knowing the situation at all! What do you think the Hong Kong mafia is? Do you think they're as much of a gaming club as Hirasaka-gumi?”

After she threw a dozen of empty cans or some, a voice came from Alice's bedside, stopping her.

“Alice, that one's not finished yet. It's a waste to throw it.”

It's Tetsu-senpai. However, he wasn't stopping Alice, unfortunately for me, and instead was just handing the empty cans to her. Thus, the barrage continued for a while.

“Narumi! Kneel down there! What did you discuss with Huang Hong Lei? Tell me everything to the last detail!”

I climbed to Alice's bedside, and handed the two photos I obtained from Huang Hong Lei to her, explaining everything that happened, including Huang Hong Lei leading us to the scene, the bloody photo of the incident, and how I had a dagger in my tongue. Hearing this, Alice's eyes suddenly widened as she pried my tongue open, and then, she shrieked with a pale face,

“Your tongue got cut! Tetsu, get some Dr. Pepper to disinfect it!”

“That can't be used for disinfecting, right!?”

I shoved Alice aside, and escaped from Tetsu-senpai who approached me half-jokingly with a can in his hand.

“Sorry. I'm reflecting on my brash actions too. Don't give me Dr. Pepper! It's sting the cut!”

“Your imaginationg is inferior to a snail, and you're saying that you're reflecting? Funny. If your tongue really got tongue, you won't have the ability to even talk about such useless retorts. Do you really understand?”

Upon seeing me look so dejected, Tetsu-senpai let out a snicker, saying,

“I say, Narumi...you should more or less realize that you're very famous, you know?”

“I don't want to accept this as fact, you know...”

“Ah! Right...the rumors out there say that the one who dealt with Hirasaka and chased a bunch of guys out of Tokyo was you, Narumi.”

“That's just some baseless rumors now, isn't it!?”

“I think there should be some basis, you know. Besides, you beat me.”

“No, that was, well, wasn't there a lot of other reasons too...?”

I could only cup my knees and grumble.

“Tetsu, ignore that blockhead for now. Report the police's investigation now.”

Senpai nodded, and took out a tattered notebook from the belly under his T-shirt.

“Shinjuku is outside our territory, so it took a longer time to investigate. The incident happened in Shimo-Ochiai, right? It's true that someone did report sounds of gunshots and glass breaking to the police, followed by a growl from a young man.”

I didn't know the means Tetsu-senpai used, but he was often able to obtain intel from the police. He's able to ask for the important information easily every time, and I'm starting to be a little worried about the security of this country.

“How many gunshots?”

Alice asked as she continued to tap at the keyboard while looking at the

screen.

“4 times.”

“Isn't that enough to be considered a criminal case?”

“The cops are doing a thorough search as we speak, and even requested Huang Hong Lei to let them in to investigate. In the end, nothing.”

I felt a chill, and inadvertently recalled the sight of that photo overlapping with reality, causing the cut on my tongue to burn with a stinging pain. How long did it take for the police to respond to the gunshot? Was it possible to clean up the glass and bloodied bed so thoroughly before they arrived? I guess the mafia's probably very familiar with such scenes...maybe there are people who specialize in handling them. Even my arms were starting to shiver at this point.

I didn't want Alice to notice that I was shivering, so I treaded off the bed lightly and left the office. The air surrounded my skin like warm water.

I continued to sit on the turnabout of the stairwell, and tucked my head between my knees, sighing hard. If I continued to shiver inside the office, Alice would say those words again,

“Don't get involved.”

I didn't have the conviction, and I'm not used to picking fights with others. It was to be expected that Alice would say this.

If this kept up, I would simply be repeating my past failures! Got to pull myself together! Don't act rashly wiithout being prepared! I continued to tell myself this, grabbing my thighs.

At this moment, the sound of someone coming up the stairs caused me to lift my head.

“What's the matter, Narumi? Heard your mouth got cut?”

It was Hiro. He had already taken off the apron at his waist. I wiped my lips with the back of my hand. Did he notice something?

“No, it's nothing. Nothing at all.”

Hiro sat down beside me, and sighed hard.

“I get the feeling that our positions are different. I don't think I'll be able to tell you not to force yourself like usual, you know? I'm the one making the request. It feels weird.”

Now that Hiro said so, that did seem to be the case. When we received his request, we didn't know how to face him. Luckily—or maybe not, we were so busy that we hardly had the time to talk, so we hadn't realized our issues before this.

I really wished that Hiro would continue to be that irresponsible gigolo of a big brother, always comforting others with a kind tone—that was what I really hoped—but even Hiro, who was so frviolous, would seriously fight for important things in his life.

“Erm, it may seem inappropriate to ask now, but, “ I said, “Hiro, you're serious about Min-san here, right?”

“Yeah.” Hiro smiled heartily.

“Please don't get angry.”

“Angry about what?”

“I still can't believe that you're for real.”

“Min-san doesn't seem to believe either...because I'm like the boy who cried wolf.”

So he knew that?

“So, well, I don't think I'm acting because of your request, Hiro. To be honest, I'm doing this for Min-san, and for Alice. You don't have to worry about me.”

“It hurts having you state so bluntly.” It's because this guy always said such words with a smile that nobody ever thought he was serious, I guess. Thinking hard about it, this guy really had it tough.

“I'm being very serious here, you know? There isn't a woman better than Min-san out there, you know?”

“See? That's what I'm talking about.”

“Ahh, yes. I see. I'm reflecting on that.”

“Why didn't you confess to Min-san right from the beginning? You starting learning how to make ramen since a long time back, didn't you? When Min-san was going out hiring employees, you could have signed up for it, couldn't you, Hiro?”

“The problem's that I idn't look like someone who'll work! That's why I kept waiting for the chance, and then I thought that if I can pretend to interact with girls, I'll be able to naturally work at 'Hanamaru'.”

I looked up at the evening sky, and sighed longingl. I see. So this is basically the 'my own kind of cage' line from a certain lyric, right? I'm guessing that it's a Mr. Children song.”

“It's because you keep insisting on such things that nobody thinks you're being serious, right?”

“I know that too...but when I said that I'm aiming for high school girls, it's partly true...”

This guy's really hopeless.

“Speaking of which, Hiro, your gigolo lifestyle hasn't changed at all. You're still staying at that bartender lady's place, right? How is that going to make Min-san think that you're serious?”

“You're right...”

I inadvertently tossed aside my shame, and had the desire to tell Hiro off. At this point, I guess I gave up on myself, no? I didn't have the right to tell others off, and I'm just bullying the weak to make myself feel better. I'm really terrible.

“Actually, I went to see Huang Hong Lei today.”

“Eh-ehh? Then, the mouth injury was.”

“Ahh, no, it's nothing much. The problem is that it looks like he really wants to marry Min-san.”

Hiro frowned as he gave a bitter smile.

“And he said that even if we did find Hanada Masaru, he doesn't intend to let go of Min-san. He's an entrepreneur, has an amazing number of assets, and probably isn't as much of a playboy as you. I'm guessing that he isn't the type to

fool around like you. It looks like Xiao Ling-san and him were the only ones living there, so he does seem to be able to do some housework at least—”

I suddenly stopped, and covered my mouth.

Something seemed amiss, but what? I instinctively stood up on the stairs. “Narumi?” Hiro called out to me in surprise. However, I continued to stand still and look up high. What did I think was amiss?

“Ah!”

I turned around, and opened the detective agency door before rushing in. Alice, sitting on the bed in the room, was taken aback as she jolted, while Tetsu-senpai beside her widened his eyes.

“What's with that commotion—”

“Alice!” I leapt to the beside. “Remember when Xiao Ling-san came here? She described what happened that night, and said, “The helper taking care of Xiang Yu said that Masaru-san dumped their bodies into a car, and drove off.”

Alice widened her eyes, answering,

“...She did. So what?”

“Only Hong Lei and Xiao Ling-san live in that house. There's no helper around!”

Alice's expression changed drastically, and she immediately went for the phone.

“...Yondaime? It's me. Check everywhere for a doctor, from near Shimo-Ochiai. I'll explain later! Hurry!”

Doctor? I see. A doctor...

The sound of the door being opened could be heard from behind, “What's wrong, Narumi?” It was Hiro's voice. Before I could turn my head back, Alice hung up the phone, and stood up.

“Perfect timing, Hiro. Gather all the Chinese girls you know. We're looking for every single doctor near Shinjuku, and list them all whether they're private or unlicensed.”

“Do-doctor? Why?”

“Hurry! If the Huang Coalition get a move on us, it'll be all over. We need to hurry.”

Overwhelmed by Alice's tone, Hiro nodded, and hurriedly left the office. Right, Hong Lei must have noticed this soon. He's sharper than us all. That's why we have to be quick.

“Hey! What's going on? Why are we looking for a doctor?”

Tetsu-senpai, seated by the bed, raised a question, but Alice was already forced on the monitor in front of her, tapping at the keyboard like rain in a thunderstorm falling. She probably didn't hear Tetsu-senpai's voice, so I could only answer her,

“Hong Lei and Xiao Lingp-san are the only ones living in the villa in question, no servants at all.”

“H-hm?”

“So when she said that the helper saw it, that was a lie. Don't you understand? In other words, 'only Xiao Ling-san' said that Hanada Masaru killed two people and drove off to escape.”

Tetsu-senpai's eyes popped.

I didn't know how much of those words were a lie, but that amount of blood, gunshots, and a young man's growls were true. If she had to lie that two people were dead just to cover up the truth, the truth should be—

“Huang Xiang Yu might still be alive...”

Chapter 3

The hospital we were looking was located in a corner of the buildings located in Shinjuku Hyakunincho. The abandoned building was practically devoid of any human traces, and the display board with broken, faulty neon lights were mostly filled with Korean words. It was nearly evening, and entering my ears were the sounds of the people in the pachinko parlors by the roads, with some squabbles in Korean and the exhaust gases echoing. This place was a station away from Shinjuku, yet it felt so different.

“Over here? Really? I don't see a hospital signboard here.”

Tetsu-senpai was the first to get off the car, and said this as he lifted his head up to look at the building.

“Most likely, he's without a license. Of course he can't possibly hang his signoboard out there!”

Major said as he slipped to the side of the building's shutters, and scanned his surroundings before reaching his right arm gently for the keyhole. It felt as though there was a flash between his fingertips before the shutters opened with a clattering sound. Major's a military nut, and also a specialist at gadget creation and illegal intrusion. Amongst us in the NEET detective agency, he's the closest to being a criminal (or I'll say, he is a criminal). It's way too easy for him to unlock the doors of this abandoned building.

Inside the basement carpark was a wagon car covered in blue vinyl sheet, and one could be certain of who the owner was without looking at the license plate. We lifted the sheet to look at the car, and found an entire black stain on the chair of the co-driver seat.

Blood marks. They could be seen on the seat, and the floor leading from the bottom of the car door to the stairs .

I gulped hard.

“We'll stay put here. Go upstairs to look.”

Yondaime said to me, and beside him were a few Hirasaka-gumi members clad in black T-shirts nodding at me. Hiro had already gone for the stairs, and I again lifted my head to look at this building that was covered with black stains on the wall.

Having obtained news of the escaped vehicle from Huang Hong Lei, we immediately deployed Hirasaka-gumi and the network of the many female friends Hiro made, and spent two days to find this place. Of course, locating the doctor would help improve efficency, but the scale of our network was still rather surprising.

“Why choose such a nearby place? Even without us getting involved, if he's hiding here, he'll be found out immediately, right?”

Tetsu-senpai muttered as we went up the stairs. Actually, I was a little curious about that. The place was a ten minute walk from Kabukicho in Shinjuku, and this place was really too dangerous a hiding place for someone trying to hide from the Chinese mafia.

“This place is Korea town, that's why. The Huangs are from Hong Kong, and they probably won't be able to take action too easily, right?”

Hiro said as he walked in front of us.

The reason why we were able to find this place was due to an eyewitness account from a Korean girl Hiro knew. On the night of the incident, a car drove into this building, and on the third floor, that typically didn't have any lights on, there were a few shadows.

The fireproof door on the third floor of the building was tightly shut, and Major spent a lot of work just to unlock it. We entered the pitch dark floor, and immediately scented a whiff of disinfectant. The long and narrow corridor was made even more narrow due to the crude black sofa and the stacked cardboard boxes. Major entered the room first, and came out again.

“Nobody inside at all.”

So, all members of the detective agency entered at the same time.

In front of us was a messy, filthy hospital room,and we couldn't tell where the clinic was, where the bed was, where the toilet was. The fact that there was electricity and potable water available was surprising in itself. The shelves, tables and desks were all covered in dust, but at the basin, there was clearly signs of blood that was washed away recently.

“They dealt with the wounds here, and drove off in another vehicle?”

Tetsu-senpai flipped through what appeared to be a patient log as he asked this.

“That should be the case, right? Now, the problem is, where's the doctor? Did he run away as well?” Major answered as he rummaged all over the tables.

“Narumi, have you contacted the mafia?”

Hiro asked me, and I shook my head.

“No. I want to try finding all the beneficial evidence and hide them, so after a complete search I'll give a call.”

We're only pretending to help the Huangs because we didn't want to help them, and that was why we asked about the escape vehicle. Because of that, I hoped to use that little extra time we had.

“It feels like you've been saying a lot of scary stuff recently, Narumi...”

“Eh? R-really?”

“If the mafia finds out that you're acting on your own like that, you'll definitely be killed.”

“Ah, ye-yeah, but...”

“Don't worry.” Hiro smiled. “I'm the requesting party this time, so I'll bear half of that price.”

“Hiro...” Even if that was a joke, this guy's really kindhearted.

“I'll just take half of your chopped body then!” I'm an idiot for trusting this guy!

“Speaking of which, how did you know that the girl who should have been dead is still alive?”

Tetsu-senpai asked, I want to know too, and Hiro gave me such an expression. Everyone had been running around over the past two days, so I didn't have the time to explain the details to them.

“It's not that I'm completely certain she's still alive, but,”

I turned to look out of the dim window.

“It's just that Xiao Ling-san definitely lied.”

Back then, what she told us was this,

Hong Lei's fiancee, Huang Xiang Yu was staying in the house of the siblings Huang Hong Lei, Huang Xiao Ling in Shimo-ochiai. However, this marriage was a political marriaged by the Chinese mafia to establish bloodline relationships. In fact, Xiang Yu had another boyfriend, and a few days ago, that boyfriend, the man named Umeda Kouji held a gun and barged into the Shimo-Ochiai resdience. Hanada Masaru, hired as a bodyguard to Xiang Yu, killed them in accident because Xiang Yu got up to protect Umeda Kouji. He then loaded their corpses onto the car and drove off, and these events were witnessed by the helper in the house.

“I heard that too.” Tetsu-senpai nodded.

“But the problem here is that the siblings don't have a helper in their house.”

“Hm?”

“So in fact, the real witness of the incident was Xiao Ling-san. Hong Lei only returned home after receiving Xiao Ling-san's call, so back when the incident happened, she was at home.”

“The why did she have to lie that a helper saw it?”

“Because she's a fan of Ichihara Etsuko[5]?”

“Major, stop interrupting!” This is serious business I'm talking about!

“You really like humor like usual, Vice-Admiral Fujishima. You just shot down this deliberate joke from me with the precision of an M24 sniper rifle.” He's annoying. I guess I shouldn't bother with him.

“As for the reason why Xiao Ling-san would lie, it's still a guess for now...”

actually, everything after this was just a guess, “Hanada Masaru killing Xiang Yu might be just Xiao Ling-san lying.”

“Lying? Then, that guy with the slick hair was fooled as well? Tetsu-senpai said as he folded his arms in front of his chest.

“That's likely the case. But Alice is a detective. If Xiao Ling-san has to lie about a witness in front of her, it'll be troublesome if that's to be seen through or suspected. That's why she went ahead to create a fake witness.

“No, but...”

Hiro lifted his head and stared into space.

“But this lie can only work once, right? If her explanation doesn't tally with what her older brother said, it'll be seen through. In fact, you saw through it, Narumi. That person doesn't look stupid, and probably won't be so careless as to believe such words, right?”

“I'm feeling strange about this too. I grabbed my hair messily. “That person's words and actions were really too weird. Even till now, I still can't figure out why she came to look for Alice, and I don't know what she hoped for us at the NEET detective agency to accomplish. She said that she's very close to Hanada Masaru, but she didn't look as though she was worried about him. She heard from us that we wanted to assist in looking for him, and immediatley got us to Hong Lei without hesitation.”

“But Narumi, you can more or less guess the reason for that, right?”

“Hm, I guess.” I really had no confidence at all, and could only look down at my toes.

“As Hiro said, that lie could only work once. I guess this might be what Xiao Ling-san's real objective is? In fact, she remains in contact with Hanada Masaru, and even knows his whereabouts, and assisted him fully. The reason why she came to the office was to let us know what happened, and for us to do whatever we wanted. I guess that's to buy some time? That was a flimsy lie she made, but she got the time she needed. It probably doesn't matter even if everything was seen through now.”

“Buy time? For what?”

“Probably—to get Xiang Yu as far away as possible.”

Hiro remained rooted, Tetsu-senpai's mouth remained ajar, and Major, flipping through the patient log, stopped.

“...Eh? Eh? Erm?”

The first to recover was Hiro.

“So it's the fiancee who escaped willingly?”

“That should be the case. She probably doesn't want to marry Hong Lei, whom she doesn't like anyway, right?”

“Were Masaru-san and that woman Xiao Ling secretly helping?”

Tetsu-senpai asked, and I nodded.

Xiao Ling-san and Hanada Masaru-san collaborated in establishing a lie that Huang Xiang Yu was killed, and other than that reason, I couldn't think of anything else. Xiao Ling-san probably hated such political marriages that were unbefitting of the times. When Hanada Masaru got married with Min-san's mother, he suffered a lot due to the Huangs' pickiness.

“You too are really something to be able to continue deducing like that, as if it's the real thing...” Tetsu-senpai seemed to have given up.

“Erm, no, that's.”

“Do you guys really think Narumi's smart now? What he said were all my hypothesis.”

Suddenly, I heard Alice's voice, and literally jolted.

“Ahh, sorry that I didn't mention it to you. I'm connected to the voice channel from the detective agency.”

Major pointed at the mini-device hanging at his waist as he said this. Eh? Th-that means, did Alice hear everything I just said?

“Stop wasting time and get to work. Crafting the truth based on facts is my job, and your jo is to copy everything you see as fact. Also, what was with that explanation, Narumi? Couldn't you have been more orderly with what you said? Your points are as erratic as the mosquitoes in late Autumn flying around, and

you even put your hypothesis up front as though it really happened—”

Alice continued to rattle on, but we still had to continue work. The sound of exhaust gases from the cars could be heard outside, followed by some frantic footsteps running up the stairs.

The boors to the clinic was slammed open roughly, and Yondaime barged in.

“Huang Hong Lei found us! They're here!”

Everyone present was startled by those words, and the files, notes and patient records in our hands nearly fell to the floor. I didn't contact them.

I heard the voices of the Hirasaka-gumi members downstairs, and this time, a few of them could be heard running up the stairs. Slamming aside the clinic door and shoving aside Yondaime was Huang Hong Lei, dressed in a greysuit and long coat. The men following behind had either shaved eyebrows or bald heads, and clearly, they were not decent people.

The long narrow eyes under the slick head scanned the room like a Qinglong sword, and stopped the moment they spotted me. Huang Hong Lei took large strides towards me, and I shrank back in fear.

“Hey, wait—”

Tetsu-senpai noticed that something was amiss, and wanted to shield himself in front of me, only for Huang Hong lei to knock him aside with his shoulder as he closed in in my. Sparks seemed to fly in my vision, and my back was slammed into the wall as I was unable to breathe. There was a scorching burn on my face, followed by pain, and my brain finally understood that I was beaten up.

“You bastard!”

Tetsu-senpai yelled, but I hurriedly reached out to stop him.

“Wait, stop, calm down, senpai!”

Something seemed to be busted in my mouthl At first, I felt the taste of blood stinging my mouth. Tetsu-senpai frowned, and I cautiously turned to look at Huang Hong Lei.

“Since you found this place, why didn't you contact me immediately?”

Hong Lei's words seemed to stab deep into my flanks and organs. I could only look away, because there was no point in giving any excuses.

“Hey! Drop everything you have in your hands!”

Hong Lei turned to yell at Major and Hiro, and the latter silently put the info they had in their hands onto the table and shelf respectfully. Hong Lei then turned to me, tilting his head with a stoic look.

“I told you that if I'll kill you if you dare do anything funny, right?”

He grabbed my shoulder.

“Hey!” “You bastard!”

Tetsu-senpai and Yondaime's voices echoed. At this moment, the voice of the girl suddenly came from Major's waist.

“Huang Hong Lei.”

The shoulders under the longcoat reacched. After calling him, Alice started rambling a bunch of words, but I could not understand anything at all. She was (probably) speaking in Chinese.

Alice's voice continued for a while, and the communicator went silent. Hong Lei immediately lifted his head to look at Major.

“...What was that?”

Major leaned on the wall, reaching for the equipment hanging on his waist.

“That's our commander, the NEET detective. She's somewhere else right now, only connected with us through voice.”

Hong Lei frowned.

“Is that the kid hacker Xiao Ling mentioned?”

Major nodded. Hong Lei spoke a few words of Chinese to the communicator, and after a few exchanges, Hong Lei shoved me to the wall, and turned to leave.

“I won't kill you yet. Now scram.”

“—You idiots! Do you have to understand only when you're killed?”

We returned to the detective agency;I was caught by Min-san at the emergency staircase, and took a beating from her.

“Didn't I warn you that they're mafia? They'll dig out eyeballs without flinching!”

“Sorry, erm.”

It appeared that Min-san already knew where I came back from, and what I encountered too. I was shaken by her by the collar, and suddenly heard a rattling of the emergency staircase as footsteps came downstairs.

“Narumi!”

I turned back to look, and found a figure dressed in blue pajamas leapt towards me with the light behind her.

“You were beaten? Did you suffer any fracture? Do you need the hospital?”

Alice hugged my waist, and asked with a teary look on her face. I was taken aback, and for some reason, my mind thought of something ridiculous. Hasn't she been running outside for a while recently?

“Alice, ca-calm down! I haven't had any major injuries, just another cracked skin in my mouth.”

“I was careless of our actions! I didn't notice that Huang Hong Lei already knew of our actions! I won't be sending you over to such dangerous places again. Stay inside the ICU obediently for the rest of your life!”

“What are you thinking of my life as!?”

“You two idiots. Now's the time for idle chit-chat, huh?”

Min-san proceeded to exert more crazy strength on us, and hung both Alice and me on her shoulders.

“Woah!” “Wahhh!”

And just like that, we were carried off into the agency, and thrown onto the bed. With Min-san's anger showing no signs of subsiding, Alice and I immediately got to our knees.

“What about the other idiots? Didn't you come back together?”

Min-san went straight to the point and asked that. She clenched her fist as she asked, and I could only pull my head back in as I answered obediently.

“Well, we'll definitely get scolded by you when we return to 'Hanamaru', so Senpai, Major and Hiro went straight home first, and left the job of being scolded to me.”

“I see!” Following that was another punch. The wound in my mouth ached again.

“Master, if you have to beat him up, please beat the stomach! What'll happen if Narumi won't be able to talk again? It'll be troublesome when he has to order full packs of Dr. Pepper!” “There's more troublesome things than that, right?”

“And then? What were you investigating that made Hong Lei rough you up? Was it that you're looking for my dad?”

“Actually, that's right.”

The moment I said it, I instinctively cupped my head. Min-san merely sighed.

“And even if you did find him...what can you do?”

Min-san's voice sounded like water that had accumulated for quite a while, trickling from a crack.

I glanced aside at Alice, and the petite detective nodded. She lifted her head, and said to Min-san.

“Master, actually, Hanada Masaru didn't kill Huang Xiang Yu.”

Min-san widened her eyes slgihtly, and for a moment, was silent. I stared at her face, not daring to gulp for breath.

“Hanada Masaru and Huang Xiao Ling put up an act to get Xiang Yu to escape from the marriage she was unwilling to participate in.”

“...Why did he do such a stupid thing?”

“Because Hanada Masaru's wife too did the same thing when she chose between the Huangs and her love. You should know this better than anyone else, Master.”

Min-san looked aside. I stealthily peeked at Alice's sidelong face. Didn't she tell

me not to state my guesses as though they're reality? Now she's concluding everything from the beginning to the end. Is this really alright?

“And then? What can he accomplish by doing this?”

Min-san spat.

“Didn't he betray the Huangs again? He left his job and ran away, didn't he?”

“But Master, at the very least, you don't have to feel guilty over it, and you don't have to let Huang Hong Lei have his way with you.”

“Stop acting like you know what's going on.”

She hissed her voice.

“Do you know why I'm really feeling guilty? It's debt.”

“...Eh? Debt? I exchanged looks with Alice beside me, and saw that she was biting her lips. It appeared she knew nothing, just like us.

“When dad and mom opened 'Hanamaru', they took a loan from a creditor.

“Creditor? What's that?”

“Chinese who came to Japan to develop came together to establish a credit association. When the business first started out, or whenever there was any emergency, they could borrow money from them. I didn't know about this at all. It was only recently that I learned about it from Hong Lei.”

I was inadvertently speechless.

“The one running that credit association is the Huang Coalition, which means that our shop still owes the Huangs money! That bastard went ahead and disappeared while hiding such an important thing!”

Saying of that, and it might be embarrassing for him, but I guess Hanada Masaru vanished and returned to the underworld because the ramen shop hasn't been earning uch money?

“B-but, recently, 'Hanamaru' has been doing well. If you continue on, you should be able to pay back the debt, right?”

“The term had already expired a long time back. The reason why they haven't been asking for money is because my dad has been acting as a boydguard there.

That's the main reason why my dad told them not to target me. As long as the Huangs had that intention, they could take back 'Hanamaru' as interest!”

I sighed weakly, and collapsed onto the bed. I just felt that I had no strength to continue kneeling.

“In other words...Min-san, you can only let the Huangs do as they please/”

“Why do you say that?”

Min-san shrugged.

“What do you mean letting the Huangs do as they please? Hong Lei hasn't asked for anything that outrageous. I just need to dress formally and have a meal with grandpa's generation! Since I have a debt with them, I should help them that much at least, right?”

“No, but that Hong Lei's actually—”

“Using this as an excuse to force me into marriage is just your own nonsense, right? Hong Lei hasn't said that!”

Of course. If the plan went well, he could marry her. It would be too early to tell her that.

“So stop being a busybody here!”

Min-san said these words, and was about to leave the office, only to be called by me.

“What now?'

“Ehh, well.”

I clasped my hands together, and seperated them, cautiously picking my words.

“Just in case...if Huang Hong Lei really plans to marry you, what do you intend to do?”

Again, Min-san turned her face away and bit her lips, showing...quite an adorable face. Was she really being bashful?

“How would I know? Who'll really think of such wild guesses anyway?”

Min-san's back vanished outside the door of the agency, and I slumped onto the bed as though my shoulders were weighed down by the cold air of the air conditioning. Alice, who kept silent beside me till this point, sighed.

“It's rare to see you being quiet for so long.”

“Looks like I still can't imitate you.”

Alice curled her legs, her chin leaned on her thighs as she said weakly.

“Imitating me?”

“Right? The 'story'.”

“Oh, just now?”

What was Hanada Masaru trying to accomplish? And was Huang Xiang Yu really alive? These two weren't confirmed facts, but Alice told her as though they were truth.

They were not lies, but neither were they truths. One they, they would become a certain thing's—mold, a mold of reality, happiness and despair. Alice called it a 'story', a fragile dream that would break apart upon contact from the tip of a rake. It was no different from the things a graverobbing detective would be unable to deal with.

“Once it comes out from my mouth, that story would just be a lie nobody can really laugh at. It's really strange. What's the difference between you and me saying a story?”

“Uh? Nothing?”

In fact, I really didn't get what Alice was trying to imply, so I could only give vague, casual replies.

“Maybe it's because, I don't have a future in me, I guess?”

I was shocked. No future?

“A story needs an ending before it can be recited, but I can't write out that last page. Do you know? Actually, I don't really have any hope on what Master would do. I simply have an unmatched thirst for the truth, the water from the sea of curiosity that could kill if I continued drinking. For this world, I'll probably forever

be a reader...”

Alice continued to stare at my backhand that was holding down the besheet. The air conditioning continued to breathe. It appeared that she was waiting for this foolish detective assistant to start talking, like before.

“So, I'm thinking, well, can I think of that, right?”

The shoulders under the blue pajamas shook slightly, and a few strands of hair drooped upon them.

“Back then, I was so terrified of being beaten up by Master, but now I'm being so boastful now, am I not?'

“Ah, erm.”

“Well, whatever. I have an endless curiosity, and this is Hiro's request. I don't care how much beating you take, but we need to proceed with the investigation. We got to the scene first, and there are a few useful bits of information we obtained.”

“Really? We were chased out by Hong Lei after not too long. We practically found nothing there, you know?”

Alice turned around to face the monitors behind her, and began tapping at the keyboard.

“First, the obvious facts—the escape vehicle was certainly there, which means that Hanada Masaru once hid at that place. The hospital phone still works, and I can begin tracking the records from here.”

I see. A phone can reveal the location, so it's not good to use for escape. A fixed family phone wouldn't have such issues however. It can be used to contact and make preparations for escape.

“Who exactly is that doctor anyway?”

“A Korean called Choi, and if I may guess, a doctor without a license. It's just a rumor, but I heard that he handles some indecent work.”

“Indecent work?”

“Wounds that can't be openly dealt with, like gunshot wounds, abortion,

falsification of patient recrods...and even dealing with corpses.”

I inadvertently frowned.

“He's also someone of the underworld, and probably someone Hanada Masaru knew when he was a mercenary. Anyway, his whereabouts now are unknown. It's said that he's often not at home, and intel states that the last time he was seen at home was during the weekend.”

“This guy...I guess it's better for those mafia guys to look for him, right?”

It's a little strange to say such words now, but things seem to be perilous all around. Alice nodded stoically.

“What we investigated about this doctor won't be as much as what the Huang Coalition knows, so it will be wiser for us to begin investigating in other areas. Besides, I still have a foolish assistant who barges in without thinking of any possible dangers...”

I inadvertently lowered my head.

“Leaving that aside, the second important point is that there's blood on the co-passenger seat only.”

“So...what does that mean?”

“I saw, your brain is more hollow than three degrees of vacuum! Can't you just think for youself?”

“Okay...erm.”

I sat on the bed, and folded my arms.

“At the very least, I can be certain that Xiao Ling-san was lying when she said 'Hanada Masaru killed them both'.”

“Right. That's the first place. There isn't a dummy in the world who would put a corpse, or even two into the co-passenger seat. Thinking more about it, there should be 2 people on that car.

“Why?”

“Assuming that there's 3 people on the car, and one of them is wounded, would anyone let the wounded sit in the co-passenger seat?”

“Ah...yeah, I guess.”

And also, Huang Xiang Yu and that thug whose name I forgot are lovers. If they both got onto the car, and one of them was wounded, they would both be in the back seat, right? There's a need to stop the bleeding or obvious. However, the co-passenger seat's the only one with blood on it, so this excludes the fact htat there were any more than two people riding in the car.

“But there's something I really can't believe about this guess.”

“Eh?”

“Even if there's only the wounded and the driver, it's more logical to put the wounded in the back seat. With that much blood flowing out, someone might find out about them in their middle of the ride. Furthermore, it was because he put the wounded at the co-passenger seat of the car that the lie was seen through...”

“Hm, that makes sense.”

I put my hand at my chin, pondering for a while.

“Is it possible that there were actually three people on the car, but they just pretended that there were two instead?”

“What's the point of pretending that much? On the night of the incident, the nearby residents heard the growls of a young man, so there should be someone barging in. Was it really that thug called Umeda Kouji? What happened affter that? We don't know about that.”

“Uu...”

What exactly happened on that night? This doubt became the knot on our theories.

“Looks like we can only get Huang Xiao Ling to tell us. At this point, she should be willing to tell us a few things.”

“Will she really tell us? That person doesn't trust us at all.”

“That woman has no choice but to tell us the truth now, right? Huang Hong Lei already has the information we found.”

“Ah...”

I see. Huang Hong Lei isn't as stupid as me. He probably would have immediately realized that Xiao Ling-san was lying, just as Alice did.

“So...why did she lie anyway? To hide the fact that Xiang Yu's still alive and make sure nobody looks for her?”

“That's the motive I thought of immediately.”

“But if Hong Lei knew that Xiang Yu isn't dead, he'll send in all his men to track her down, right?”

“That's why Huang Xiao Ling really believes that her brother would help her let Huang Xiang Yu escape.”

“Eh? Ehhhh?”

What does that mean? That Huang Hong Lei would help Huang Xiang Yu to escape? Wasn't she his fiancee—

“...Ah!”

“I see.

Hong Lei had been aiming for Min-san all this while. The actual fiancee got killed—that situation was the perfect outcome for Hong Lei.

Thus, he would help out.

In other words, Xiao Ling-san's lie was just to bluff the old men of the Huangs? Their parents and granddad and such?

“That's just the 'story' in your heart, right?”

Alice turned back to look at me before I knew it, smiling at me.

“...What?”

“Then let's have it take shape now. See, she came to look for us now.”

Alice said as she pointed at the surveillance monitors placed by the bedside. One of them showed a woman wearing a light-colored coat, standing at the entrace of 'Hanamaru' on the first floor. From the dark night, she entered through the curtains, and into the gentle light, showing her face. It was Xiao

Ling-san.

She came over to us, so that meant that she was willing to tell us the truth? In that case, we finally had a chance to move forward.

A while after Xiao Ling-san vanished from the monitor, Alice suddenly remembered something as she turned her head around abruptly.

“Narumi, go welcome the guest!”

“Welcome? Why? You never did so before.”

“Hurry up and go!”

I got kicked off the bed. I left the agency, and peered back to look. Alice took out a set of clothing from the hill of dolls. Oh, I see. She wanted to change her clothes and avoid having Xiao Ling-san nag at her for wearing pajamas? The problem's that she only had mourning clothes and Japanese clothing. What would she do?

And just like that, two minutes later, when I brought Xiao Ling-san back to the office, I was left in a scenario where I was completely speechless. Alice was on the bed, wearing a light blue dress with a white apron. Though it was not tieed in a butterfly knot, wasn't that the costume of the famous Disney movie 'Alice in Wonderland'? Hm? Did she dress up as Alice because she's called Alice? Speaking of which, is this cosplay?

Xiao Ling-san's fiery glare hit me right in the cheek.

“...Is that your fetish? Making a little girl wear such clothing in the middle of the night?”

“Why is it that your retorts seem to end up with more misunderstanding!?”

“Isn't that because you have been complaining about my thighs every time we meet?”

Alice and my growls echoed. I see. So, since Xiao Ling-san once chided Alice for being rude by appearing in front of her guests in her pajamas, Alice decided to change clothes? But—

“Is that all the clothing you have?”

“It's just a dress up. How can I possibly be always dressed up in such a stupid manner!” Alice huffed and puffed. So she was just cosplaying? Has she been addicted to this recently? As an assistant, well, I had conflicted feelings about this. Xiao Ling-san turned her stare towards me, and frowned.

“And why are you staying in a girl's room at such a late time?”

“I'm the detective's assistant! It's work!”

“What work? Aren't you just fooling around outside in the middle of the night!? Don't your parents have anything to say about that?”

As a member of the NEET reserve forces, I was really troubled to have someone ask me such a question so formally.

“My parents aren't at home...”

For a moment, Xiao Ling-san couldn't reply. Luckily, she did not apologize, and that caused me to heave a sigh of relief. I heard that despite this reaction, that would be for the best.

“Anyway, hurry up and state the reason why you're here! You didn't come all the way here just to correct Narumi's living attitude, right?”

“That's...right.”

Xiao Ling-san sighed, and seemed to be a little lost as she scanned the freezing computer room. There was nothing like a chair in this room, so it was rather troublesome when guests showed up. Because of that, they could only stand.”

“Regarding the matter of lying to you in the beginning...I do apologize for that. I was the one who kept Xiang Yu hidden, but I can't tell you where. Also, I have no idea whether I can trust you.”

I could not help but sigh. So she was involved right from the beginning?

“Do you intend to inform your brother?”

“I won't say anything.”

Alice suddenly raised an eyebrow.

“Your brother already knew that you're lying.”

“I know. But even if he asks me, I won't say anything. Hong Lei will have to continue pretending not to know anything in front of our grandfather, and the elders. Thus, I wasn't lying, and Hong Lei didn't find out about anything. The situation has to continue like this.”

Alice narrowed her eyes, and kept staring at the chest of Xiao Ling-san's coat. She then slowly got off the bed, went to Xiao Ling-san, and suddenly reached her hand for the latter's chest, grabbing the coat and the collar of the shirt underneath, tugging hard at them.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

Xiao Ling-san shook off Alice's hand, and darted back towards the kitchen. However, I, who remained seated by the bedside, already saw it. Xiao Ling-san's shirt was seeping with a scarlet red, and there should be some bandages wrapped around them, below the collarbone. It wasn't obvious, but it appeared her flanks were wounded too.

“So even when interrogated or beaten up, you wouldn't talk. Is that what you mean?” Alice's voice was several times colder than the air conditioning.

“Even when interrogated, you can't answer. Is this unspeakable truth so important for you and your brother?'

“Since you know, why do you keep asking?”

Xiao Ling-san tugged at the front of her coat, and turned her head aside. Even against his own sister, Hong Lei wouldn't hold back? Did this person quietly accept that as a necessary ritual just to maintain her silence? This sensation was beyond mindboggling or astounding for me, and I was starting to respect her for that. She looked like a well-educated careerwoman, but she certainly had guts, to be expected of someone with the bloodline of a mafia.

So Hong Lei left it as that. He merely punished her, and accepted her lie.

In that case, Alice's prediction came true. Hong Lei assisted Xiang Yu in

escaping—because he was aiming for Min-san.

Alice returned to her bedside, and sat down beside me as she stared at Xiao Ling-san.

“What about Umeda Kouji? Was it true that he barged into the house that night?”

Xiao Ling-san raised an eyebrow, and immediately nodded.

“I initially wanted to chase him away, but Xiang Yu said that she wanted to meet him no matter what, and that man looked rather normal back then. He did not appear to have been drinking or taking drugs, and with Masaru-san around, I thought it would be fine...”

“So when Huang Xiang Yu and Umeda Kouji met, was Hanada Masaru present?”

“Yes. I was in one of the rooms, and I wasn't sure of what they were talking about. After that, I heard gunshots, and I when ran to Xiang Yu's room to have a look, I found blood on the floor and the glass shattered...”

Hanada Masaru instructed Xiao Ling-san to hide Xiang Yu, and bluffed everyone into saying that he killed the duo, before taking the grievously wounded Umeda Kouji away to escape—or so we were told.

“Why did he fire at Umeda Kouji?”

Xiao Ling-san shook her head, indicating that she did not know.

“Anyway, Hanada Masaru's actions were too quick. It felt as though he already decided to help Xiang Yu escape.”

“Well, that isn't impossible. Masaru-san had been Xiang Yu's bodyguard for a long time, and he was living with her the entire time. I think they chatted about many things. Xiang Yu too told me that she didn't want to marry because of the Huangs. I personally feel that such traditions are so dated...and she has a boyfriend, which would be harder for her to accept this.”

“So you don't know what happened to Hanada Masaru and Umeda Kouji?”

Xiao Ling-san shook her head.

“Masaru-san told me that he would contact me once everything's settled, and I'm to hide Xiang Yu the entire time. As for Umeda, I heard nothing about him.”

Speaking of which, when Hanada Masaru mentioned to 'wait for a week', did he mean to wait for him to prepare an escape for Huang Xiang Yu? Alice narrowed her eyes, and muttered,

“Maybe Umeda Kouji died.”

Xiao Ling-san's face paled slightly.

“Impossible. Didn't Masaru-san take him to a doctor?”

“That doctor doesn't have a license, and even deals with corpses. How can you be certain that Hanada Masaru took Umeda Kouji to ttreat his wounds?”

“That's because...”

“There's also another possibility, that to make it look as though Huang Xiang Yu died, there had to be a lot of blood trails. So Hanada Masaru had Umeda Kouji—”

“Masaru-san definitely won't do such a thing!” Xiao Ling-san leaned over to the bed, her face reddened as she said. I was shocked to a point where I was at a loss of words, and could only watch Alice, and back at Xiao Ling-san again.

“How can you be certain?”

Alice's questioning voice was like a sigh. Xiao Ling-san's voice was quivering slightly.

“Because Masaru-san...isn't that kind of person.”

Why? I could not help but wonder. Why would this person show such unrestrained feelings from time to time? She could lie to us and her brother so nonchalantly, yet when Hanada Masaru was mentioned, she would show a fragile side. Were they so intimate? I really had difficulty trying to piece a complete image of Xiao Ling-san in front of me. There seemed to be something missing.

“That man called Umeda might look indecent...but Xiang Yu had been telling Masaru-san the entire time that she wanted to elope with Umeda, so Masaru-san must have let him escape somewhere first, and when the situation calms

down, reunite them. That has to be it!”

After a while, both Alice and Xiao Ling-san were simply staring at each other's thighs, not saying anything at all. I sat by the bed, gulping, holding my breath as I sorted out the thoughts in my mind.

Assuming that everything Xiao Ling-san had said was correct.

They were pretending that Huang Xiang Yu died, but had her escape. There was a large amount of blood, a powerful evidence, and Hong Lei appeared to be helping in concealing the truth. The escape itself would be handled by Hanada Masaru. What? Isn't this going well? In that case, what are we doing? Running around, getting beaten, threatened, scolded. For whose sake are we suffering so much for?

Of course it's for Hiro, I answered myself. For the sake of that unbefitting love that gigolo deemed for himself.

...But was there a need to go this far?

This fatal doubt rose in my heart.

“In that case...”

Alice's muttered, and it seemed she read my mind.

“Why did you come here? What are you here to do? What do you want us to do, having us tear apart the lies little by little with the sharp blade of truth?”

Xiao Ling-san hesitated for a while. It appeared she sensed the disatisfaction in Alice's words.

“I want you to help Ming Li. This is Masaru-san's wish.”

“As I said, we can't accept such vague requests. Master never indicated that she needed our help, and never once did she say that she hated this marriage or didn't want to get involved with the Huangs. Do you want us to make the conclusion that Master's troubled about this, and take action? That's beyond the duties of a detective.”

“But, you may be the detective, but aren't you Ming Li's friend? If you just go up to her and chat, ask what she intend to do—”

“Who's her friend?”

Shocked, I glanced aside at Alice.

“If a request is made, I'm the detective, and Master's the requestor. Without her making a request, our relationship is just tenant and landlord. I'm unable to be so defenseless to interact with this world without a contractual relationship!”

Xiao Ling-san was startled, and with her arms firmly folded, she retreated to the corridor. Alice covered her mouth, and lowered her head sadly, shaking her head as though saying. It's all useless now.

“Well, whatever. I have a rough idea.”

“Wh-at?” Xiao Ling-san seemed to be groaning.

“The Objective of you coming here. That's to 'pass the message'. It was the same the last time out, right?”

An unspeakable, frozen expression appeared on Xiao Ling-san's face.

“You intend to tell us some information and achieve some objective. I don't know if it's Hanada Masaru commanding you or of your own will, but there's some other fact you're hiding, right?”

Alice's words echoed in the absolutely freezing air, like an icicle hitting the asphalt.

“If you don't have anything else to tell us, just leave already. Also, from now on, remember this. We're acting based on Hiro's request now, and we'll prevent Master and Hong Lei's marriage no matter what, no matter how unscrupulous the means. If we have to, I can choose to tell the Huang elders that Huang Xiang Yu is still alive.”

Xiao Ling-san glared at Alice with a sharp glare.

“I can't let you do it. Also, there's no way grandfather and the others will believe your words. Hong Lei and I will testify to say that she's dead.”

“That may be the case, but who knows if we don't give it a shot?”

Hearing Alice's words, Xiao Ling-san bit her lips, and then turned to leave.

Only after Xiao Ling-san left the office without saying a word did I finally heave

a sigh of relief, and slid from the side of the bed onto the floor. Just hearing the conversation beside Alice was enough for me to be so tense my joints ached.

I lifted up my eyes slightly, and the petite detective continued glaring at the door.

“...Do you really, intend to say that the fiancee's still alive?”

I asked softly. Not only would Hanada Masaru's hard work be for naught, a girl we never met would be pushed back into an abyss of unhappiness. Even if we were to complete Hiro's request, it's not a good feeling.

Alice shook her head.

“That's the last, worst resort. I don't want to do that either. As she said, the Huang elders might not believe us. Doing this may end up bringing unnecessary wrath from Huang Hong Lei, which may end up causing Master more trouble.”

I let out a huge sigh.

“You really care about Min-san!”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You just said that she's not your friend, or something.”

Alice pouted her lips, and turned her head away.

“She's not my friend in the first place. I don't have any. But Master has been taking care of me all this time, you know? Of course I'll try my best not to cause her any trouble.”

Alice turned her back on me, but her slender fingers on the keyboard didn't move. I suddenly felt a little sad.

There were a lot of people around me that I was able to be comfortable with, and so I often forgot about this. This strange girl often had a layer of loneliness around her, as untouchable as amnion.

What about me?

From her perspective, was I, who often stayed beside Alice, merely a detective assistant who shared a relationship of employer and employee with her?

That might be the case. Even in such a moment, I didn't know what to say.

But despite this, I closed my eyes a little, and tried to continue on with some words.

“Hey Alice.”

“...What?'

“Well, I'm not sure how to say this.”

I intertwined my fingers, and released them again, opening my eyes as I continued,

“At the very least, when I'm with you, I hope that you can let your guard down, somehow.”

“What!?”

I could hear Alice's voice trembling somewhat behind me.

“What are you trying to say?”

“Ahh, sorry. I'm not too sure what I'm saying either...”

“T-think of what you want to say before talking! What? What do you want me to do? I don't understand.”

I could vaguely see Alice grabbing the bedsheet tightly, and I was increasingly unsure of what to do. I hesitated for what felt like an eternity, and Alice suddenly shook her long, black hair as she turned around.

“Can't you finish what you say? Do you even know that I'm waiting for you to speak!?”

“E-eh? Ah-ahh, sorry. My mind's in a mess. So...”

“Y-you idiot! I had enough of you already!”

And for the next few moments, Alice continued scolding me with some rather weak vocabulary. What happened to her usual feistiness when she scolds me? Was she really so angry that she's at a loss of words? I was starting to worry about that.

“If you are going to come up with some words you shouldn't say, get out right now! I want to change out of this stupid outfit!”

“I think this is fine...” This costume really fit her. However, the moment Alice heard this, her face was as red as ground cherry.

“Li-lik-like this? Are you saying that you're going to keep staying here? Wh-when you said that I can let my guard down, do you mean that you want me to change clothes in front of you?”

Hey! What's with that misunderstanding? Please calm down! Alice was flustered by the words she blurted out, and started spewing more really ridiculous words. Because of that, I could only jump off the bed and leave the office.

After walking down the emergency staircase and reaching the floor, I heard the sound of the shutters being pulled. The only light in front of me was from the gap of the back door. It was closing time.

I was about to walk down the alley between the buildings and head to the front of the shop, only to meet Min-san who just returned. It was a little awkward, and I nodded and tried to leave by the side. At this moment, Min-san spoke up.

“Xiao Ling just came by, didn't she?”

“Eh? Ah...y-yeah.”

Did she notice? I guess it's easy to be noticed? Besides, anyone entering the agnecy would have to pass by the front door of the shop.

“You guys are still sneaking around with something? Seriously, and I'm busy with those brats from your class!”

“Eh, erm.”

I was at a loss of words, and I was pushed on the shoulders as Min-san went off to the back door by herself.

“That damned dad of mine's always giving me trouble too. When he comes back, I'm going to beat him real good...”

“Masaru-san,”

I instinctively turned back, only to meet the eyes of Min-san who sstopped. Why? What am I trying to say? Am I going to tell her that Hanada Masaru didn't kill anyone, that Alice's guess was correct? What can happen? It doesn't change the fact that Hanada Masaru's running around, and caused Min-san trouble.

"What? What did my dad do again? Do you know something?"

"No...it's nothing."

I shut my mouth and lowered my head.

Suddenly, I was a little upset at Hanada Masaru. In the end, aren't all the problems caused by you running around and hiding? Shouldn't dealing with troublesome underworld stuff be your specialty? Why are you able to hide without a care in the world and push all your problems to your daughter? You work so hard to protect someone else's daughter, but let Min-san alone to fend for herself, and even requested for us to help her. Isn't that too irresponsible of you?

I turned my back silently on Min-san, and was about to walk onto the road when the cellphone in my pocket rang. I took it out, and found that it was from a private nunber.

“Is that the high school kid at the detective agency?”

“Ah—it-it's you again!”

Hanada Masru's voice. Why call me again? I barely managed to recover, and twanted to switch on the recording function.

“Call Ming Li over. I got something to say to her.”

“If you got anything, come out and—”

I was about to yell back, only to hear stamps behind me, and the cellphone in my hand was snatched away. I turned back to look, and it was Min-san.

“It's me...ahh? You got to be kidding! Think of whosse fault it is here! I'm not forcing myself! I don't need you to worry...what are you trying to say? Hey! Hold it! Damn dad!”

It appeared he hung up. Min-san looked utterly furious, and I thought she would throw the cellphone down onto the ground.

“That damned bastard caused me so much trouble, and now he's trying to play the good dad?”

A boiling sound landed by Min-san's feet. She stuffed the cellphone into my hand crudely, and I, completely flabbergasted, could only see the back door in front of me being slammed shut.

The next day, after school, I made a trip to the game center, and dawdled around in the bookshop and the records shop for half a day, before finally making my way to 'Hanamaru'. After what happened the previous day, I thought it would be awkward to meet Min-san.

I parked my bicycle right by the shop, and behind the curtains, I could hear many girls, and the steamed scent of chicken bone stock filled the shop.

“So there's still these ingredients inside the shop!”

“If we can prepare them just the day before, won't it be easy?”

“Min-san, did you develop this soup stock along with Fujishima-kun?”

“Really? So he's not just being the test taster?”

“Ah, the miso ramen recently is a soup I thought of! I guess soy sauce is fine too.”

“What? Don't get cocky there, Hiro.”

“You can't use two kinds of soups, right?”

“But I prefer the soup stock Hiro made!”

“Me too!”

I didn't know what happened in the shop, so I discreetly ducked past the curtain. When I opened the door, I found all the girls in class staring at me, which startled me. One moment, everyone was on the corridor making ice cream, and today, everyone's in the kitchen. Some of them are stirring the stock in the pot, and someone's holding a chopper.

“Ah Fujishima! The taste tester Fujishima's here!”

“What test tester...eh, erm?”

I surveyed the shop again, and found the cramped kitchen filled with figures of sailor uniforms, Min-san frowning slightly, while Hiro looked delighted.

“Why is everyone making ramen?”

“You see, Min-san can't make it to the first day of the culture festival, right?” Ayaka said.

The first day of the 2 day school culture festival, November 3rd, and on that day, Min-san had to play the substitute of Hong Lei's fiancee, so she wouldn't be able to be in charge of food hygiene in our class 2-4's shop.

“The school said that heated items can be sold, so I thought we might as well sell ramen for the first day!”

Ayaka puffed her chest proudly.

“Why!? Isn't that crazy already? What kind of weird shop in this world sells both ramen and ice cream at the same time—wahwahwahwah, sorry, Min-san, I was joking!”

Min-san raised the chopper, appearing as though she was about to flip the counter, scaring me so much I had to cup my head and apologize.

“Hmph!”

Min-san snorted unhappily.

“I don't want to either! Making ice cream is one thing, but our ramen isn't that delicious that we can just teach others. I don't want to teach, but what to do? The pamphlets were already printed...”

“Pamphlets?”

Ayaka took a few printed copies of the pamphlets and showed them to me. They were to be placed at the school entrance on the day itself.

The super famous 'Hanamaru'!

Premieres for the first time!

...Well, those were the words written.

“We printed a few pieces, and 'Hanamaru' is actually rather famous!”

“It's famous because of the ice cream, right?” Min-san pouted. “Customers definitely come by for the ice cream. Won't they get angry at you for selling ramen?”

“No way. Your ramen's good too, Min-san.”

“Though it was somewhat bad in the past...”

“You can't just be honest like that.”

“We'll be selling ice cream the next day anyway.”

“Even though we are selling ramen, it's 'Hanamaru' flavor, so it's not conning them, right?”

Hearing the girls' honest feedback, all Min-san could do was to scratch her head reluctantly. Well, to be honest, I didn't know whether this was okay or not...Hiro could only give a wry smile.

I returned back to the old gathering spot outside the back door, and sat on an old tyre, letting out a long sigh. It's thanks to Ayaka that the awkwardness between Min-san and me was resolved. That really helped me out.

“What's with you, Vice-Admiral Fujishima? Forced out by the happy atmosphere in the kitchen?”

Saying that as he walked in front of me was Major, wearing camouflage clothing and carrying a huge backpack.

“It's a good thing. If you participate in the culture festival, you won't be able to become a capable NEET. When I was in high school, I was always skipping classes and staying at home to do proxies and programming.”

“Don't lump me together with you, Major. I'm just waiting to taste test the ramen.”

And speaking of which, how was this guy like during High School? I got the feeling that I could imagine, and yet at the same time, I felt a little terrified.

“Right, now back to the main point. The analysis of the recording's almost

done.

Major sat down opposite me, took out a notepad computer from his backpack, and switched it on.

“It feels weird. The voice in the recording is clear enough to assume that a noise suppressor was used. Maybe he used a phone with some similar function to prevent anyone from knowing where he was, or maybe he was in the basement...?”

Major's current job was to analysis Hanada Masaru's phone recording. Maybe he might be able to obtain some clues from the background, so he had earphones on to be sure.

After Min-san had her phone call with Hanada Masaru the previous day, I listened to the recording again. Thinking about that caused me to feel heavy-hearted.

What Hanada Masaru said was,

“Don't worry about me. You don't have to care about anything!”

“There's no need to keep running the ramen shop. Just do whatever you want!”

“Just think of what's the best life for you!”

The conversation didn't mesh, and the phone call suddenly cut off. No wonder Min-san was so furious. What's he thinking, saying such selfish words?

Soon after, Tetsu-senpai appeared at the gathering spot in front of the emergency staircase.

“I found Umeda Kouji's hidehout. As expected, there wasn't anyone there.”

Senpai noted confidently, and it terrified me.

“Is he a member of a gang?” Major asked.

“Right. He's a member of a gang in Kabukicho called the Daisei Association, and was in charge of collecting debt. I went to ask them, and heard that a few years back, he went out with a great beauty from China. Both of them had a long distance relationship.”

“That Daisei Association didn't help them to escape?”

“I heard not! He brought a gun to a squabble with some Hong Kong mafia, and was expelled. Even if the Huang Coalition don't kill him, the Daisei Association will take action, right?”

“Hm, well, yeah...”

“But in the past few months, he had been very effective in collecting debts, and he even got rid of the drugs. I heard that he saved quite a bit.”

“Was he preparing to elope?”

“It's possible...”

I heard Major and Tetsu-senpai carry out such a dangerous conversation, and at this moment, Hiro took off his apron and exited the back door. The members of the NEET detective agency were gathered. Is it fine for him to leave his work behind? However, Ayaka's in the shop, and there's a lot of attendants helping to work for free. I guess it's fine for him not to be around?

“And then, what do you intend to do, Hiro?” Tetsu-senpai asked. “You're the requestor this time, so you decide what to do this time, you know. We found all we could investigate. If you don't figure out where do we investigate, it'll just be a waste of time.”

“That's right.”

Hiro sat on the first step of the emergency staircase, dropping his shoulders lethargically.

“There are a few ways next...”

Major raised 3 fingers as he said to Hiro,

“First, we find Huang Xiang Yu and return her to the Huangs. That'll make us enemies with Huang Hong Lei, but it's effective.”

“I can't let another girl cry because of my love now, right? Besides, she's Min-san's cousin, and should be a beauty too...”

“The next one is to find Hanada Masaru and hand him over to the Huangs. It'll be the same goal as Hong Lei, but finding him might not improve the situation.”

“If Masaru-san can't bear responsibility, there's a high chance of the situation being worse.”

“The third is just to return the money.”

“Ah...” Hiro scratched his head. “Will Min-san allow anyone to help her return the money?”

“Hiro. Do you have any? I don't”

“Tetsu-san, this isn't something you can say proudly. But I'm broke too...”

“Nope, but if I sell the Ferrari...ah, the Ferrari isn't bought under my name. How much can I earn by selling that BMW? I had that car for quite a while, so around 6 million Yen or so? But...”

I interrupted.

“Hiro, you seem tired. Did you get scolded by Min-san?”

We're being busybodies due to Hiro's request. If Min-san's going to scold, she's going to start from Hiro first. However, Hiro merely shook his head.

“I didn't get scolded...but I just felt that there's nothing to worry. Masaru-san didn't kill anyone, and Hong Lei doesn't want to pursue that eloping couple. Even Min-san herself doesn't look like she detest that cousin...” Hiro's voice got less lively. “It's because of my own selfishness that things got so complicated, right?”

“N-not at all. Hiro, about Min-san,”

“Well, you're right, Hiro!” “There's a fourth way, and that's to get Hiro to shut up.” “You two are terrible! Are you even friends!”

“Narumi, think about it! We're just paving the road for Hiro to trick a woman again.”

“Ahh...no, well...”

“Right. Actually, I feel that if this keeps up, I'll be the one troubled.”

Hiro actually saying those words himself really disturbed us.

And there was something I was particularly concerned with. Was it really just Hiro being the only one troubled? Min-san might get married with Hong Lei for real, actually. Are we going to let her be?

Right when I was pondering, a shrill guitar riff entered my ears. 'Colorado Bulldog', the personalized ringtone of Alice. I lifted my head in surprise. So all the members in the agency had the same ringtone.

The first to pick up the call was Hiro, and the other phones went silent.

“Hello...yeah, everyone's present. Eh? Do we connect? Can't we just head up to the office? Right...I know.”

Hiro took out a cable, and Major connected it to his computer. With this, eveyrone could connect to Alice without having to listen to the phone.

“Report your findings to me.”

“Why report here?” Tetsu-senpai grumbled, and Alice immediatley retorted harshly,

“For the time being, I've decided not to let that shameless assistant of mine enter the office.”

The trio's eyes gathered upon me, and I could only look aside and lower my head. I said it's a misunderstanding! It's Alice who misunderstood. However, explaining this would require me to start from the beginning, including the moment when Alice was dressed up as Alice...ah, forget about it. I'm starting to be confused about what's going on.

“I analyzed the phone called from Hanada Masaru—” Major was the first to report, and I heaved a sigh of relief. Couldn't hear the background, and the sound quality's good; couldn't find any hints of a location. Major's report was basically similar to before. Tetsu-senpai then reported, and Alice cleared her throat, saying,

“I've check the call records from the doctor's phone, It appears that Hanada Masaru was in the clinic for a long time.”

“E-erm, Alice.”

Hiro interrupted,

“Are we still going to track down Masaru-san?”

“Of course. Looking from a logical or risks standpoint, the most ideal method will be to find Hanada Masaru and have him clean up the mess.”

“Well, that's logical...”

I knew what mood Alice was in when she decided this. Hiro made this request based on Alice's request. Alice just wanted to know the truth, what happened on that day, what Hanada Masaru was thinking, and where he was, what was he doing. That was why she had to be so decisive in convincing the rattled requestor.

“I shall continued to explain then. On that night, Hanada Masaru called two places. One of them was Huang Xiao Ling, and it was for three hours long.”

“3 hours...” Major folded his arms.

“If he intends to bluff everyone and have the couple elope, 3 hours of conversation is considered normal, right?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

“But despite so, personally, I feel 3 hours is too long. Huang Xiao Ling probably is hiding something else, but I don't intend to pursue the matter. The second phone call was made to a shop in Yokohama called Matsugahara Tradings.”

Major and Tetsu-senpai tilted his head, and only Hiro's mouth remained open. I too had an impression on that shop name.

“It appears to be a shop that sells dried goods and flour.”

“...That's our supplier.” Hiro mutttered. Right, I remember that shop. Back in April, when Hanada Masaru slipped back into 'Hanamaru' and left a bunch of rare ingredients, that supplier was one of the shops mentioned.

“Yes. That may be a shop Hanada Masaru knew of when he ran the ramen shop...but why called the supplier at such a moment? Did he intend to request the supplier for something—?”

“Ah!”

I suddenly recalled something, and inadvertently stood up.

“This is bad, Alice! I-I told Hong Lei that shop name!”

The trio of the detective agency went pale, and I could even hear Alice gasp from the speakers of the notepad computer. Hiro immediately got up and ran past the back door of the kitchen.

“Sorry, let me through! Min-san, do you have the contact to Matsugahara Trading? By the phone? No, it's fine!”

I peeked in from the back door, and saw Hiro dash out of the corridor. The girls from my class peeked at the corridor nervously, and after a while, there was the sound of the phone being slammed, before Hiro shooed aside the many sailor uniforms as he went out of the back door.

“I couldn't contact him! I'll go have a look!”

“Ah! I-I'll go with you too!”

Hiro drove the car down the Tomei Expressway, and I was in the co-passenger seat, explaining the situation to Alice. When I went to Huang Hong Lei’s house and requested to investigate the scene, they asked for information regarding Hanada Masaru as collateral, so I informed him that Hanada Masaru brought some rare ingredients from a few suppliers to ‘Hanamaru’.

“I-I never expected that information to be related to this incident! Hong Lei was pressuring me back then, and I just said a few random things about Hanada Masaru, trying to throw him off…”

“I’m not berating your cowardice since I already knew about it. Why did you only mention it at this time!”

Alice’s fury was no lesser than the turbulent headwinds that rattled the car windows.

“I’m really sorry!”

I hung up the phone, and groveled into the seat. I glanced aside, and found Hiro holding the steering wheel, looking on grimly.

Hong Lei must have questioned those suppliers one by one. He asked them whether they had received contact from Hanada Masaru.

I never expected that Hanada Masaru actually gave a call to the suppliers. Why? What did he want with the suppliers? Did the suppliers tell Hong Lei about this? What will happen after he knows? A nauseous feeling rose up along with the unrest within me, only to be pressed down by the car accelerating again.

We got off the expressway at the Yokohama-Aoba interchange, and followed the traffic signals down the riverside. The short sunset in October was about to fade into the West, and simply opening the car window of the co-passenger seat was enough to let the frozen air in. Many cars and Middle School students released from school passed us by, and we barely managed to glide into an alley that might be too narrow for a foreign car to drive through, meandering around the residential area that was devoid of crowds.

Matsugahara Tradings was located in a back alley next to the shopping street in front of the station, and would look like a rusted, dated garage if not for the old carved wooden signboard. The shutters of the shop were closed, and Hiro parked his car in front of it.

We went to the back of the shop , and pressed the doorbell there. After a while, there was still no response, and Hiro, being impatient, yelled.

"We're employees of 'Hamamaru' in Tokyo! Is Matsugahara-san in there? We're from Tokyo, and we just called over."

The door opened slightly, while Hino and I remained rooted there. Appearing there was a diminutive man entering old ages, a jumper draped over his shoulders. His lips were cut and bruised purple, while there were bruises around his eyes. It wasn't obvious, but it appeared that he was unable to move his right arm, and he could only open the door weakly with his left hand.

"Please go back!" The man exclaimed, "You're Hanada-san's men, aren't you? Go back!"

"Erm-did something happen? Your wounds..."

"Don't worry about that and just go back already. I've known Hanada-san for a long time already, but I won't be doing business with you ever again."

"Wait!" Hiro begged earnestly. "Please, just tell us what happened."

"Enough! Go back! I don't ever want to get involved with you people ever again! l had enough of some Yakuza or Chinese mafia already. I only helped out because Hanada-san requested me, so why did I end up getting involved with them?"

The door was slammed shut, and following that was the sound of the door being locked, followed by a chain.

"Matsugahara-san, did Hanada-san request you to do something? Please tell us that at least!"

Hiro continued slamming at the door.

"I have nothing to say to you anymore, if you aren't going to leave, I'll call the police!"

We heard this voice from beyond the door , followed by the furious footsteps gradually fading. Hiro slammed at the door, gasping hard, and I could do nothing to console him.

Chinese. Did the Huang Coalition drop by? The boss even said that Hanada Masaru did request him.

Suddenly, I felt a sensation, that the ground beneath became liquid.

It was all my fault.

I had a feeling that my careless giveaway of the information to Huang Hong Lei resulted in ruining something-Hanada Masaru planned, and even resulted in an ordinary civilian being hurt. It was all my fault.

Let's go back, Hiro said. I was spacing out, so Hiro's words sounded like the strange sound of a cassette recording being replayed.

The sun had already set by the time we returned to 'Hanamaru', and all that wa sleft was the light in the shop shining onto the street through the windows. The customers dressed in working attire was crammed outside the shop, and a group of people were seated on overturned beer crates and chairs, slurping their ramen. I could hear the sounds of drunk people ordering more gyoza or beer.

“Ah, Hiro, you're back? I had to stay and help because you ran out just now! I'll be collecting pay from you later!”

Ayaka, dressed in a black apron, walked out of the shop as she said that. She then looked at me, and then at Hiro, blinking as she tilted her head.

“...Did something happen? Both of you look weird.”

I shook my head weakly, while Hiro forced a rather perfect smile.

Between the buildings, at the gathering spot outside the back door of the kitchen, Tetsu-senpai and Major were facing each other, eating a bowl of ramen each. They noticed Hiro and me, put down their chopsticks, and lifted their heads.

“So how?” Senpai asked.

“Eh? Well...”

Hiro's voice was as shriveled as ever, and he sat on a beer crate. I felt that I wouldn't be able to stand again if I sat down, so I could only lean on the wall beside the back door.

While explaining the events at Matsugahara Tradings, and Tetsu-senpai and Major silently stared at the surface of the steaming salt-flavored ramen. Once Hiro was done, everyone went silent, and the laughter of the drunk customers, Ayaka's cheerful voice and Min-san's growls felt so distant.

Tetsu-senpai lifted his eyes slightly.

So, what do we do? I couldn't hear the voice, but it seemed he was asking that.

“Sorry, everyone.”

Hiro muttered.

“I want to cancel the request.”

I got up from the wall, and Major pushed his goggles up onto his forehead, while Tetsu-senpai kept staring at Hiro's eyes.

“It's because of my stubborness that got innocents involved...I can't talke this anymore. This isn't some great request, and even if I give up, I'll be the only one troubled...”

“Wait, please wait!”

I inadvertently approached Hiro.

“It's not just you, Hiro. Everyone's troubled. If Min-san's really going to marry that mafia heir—”

Min-san's voice could be heard from the back door.

...Yes, spring onion and salt ramen and gyoza. Ice cream today is raspberry flavored. Anyone wants it? Raise your hands. Why everyone? This is a ramen shop! Seriously...

“If they really got married, Min-san won't be able to run 'Hanamaru' anymore.”

A damp silence filled our surroundings. Tetsu-senpai and Major curled their lips and stared at the light coming out from the back door.

Finally, Hiro stood up, smiling as he shook his head. He reached his arm out to me, patted me on the shoulders, and passed by me to walk out of the alley. I saw him take his cellphone out of his pocket, talking on the phone.

“...Alice? It's me. There's something I got to say...yeah, it's about that.”

The white half-coat became as distant as Hiro's voice.

“Let's stop with the investigations. As for the expenses...you can calculate it, and I'll pay it all...no, I'm serious. Yeah...don't be so angry. Yes, I'm really sorry...”

Starting the next day, there was an abnormal cermonious atmosphere in 'Hanamaru'. Starting off was the Hirasaka-gumi.

“So Master's marriage partner to be isn't Hiro-ojisa?”

“I heard 'Hanamaru's going to close down. Is it true?”

“That's what Tetsu-ojisa said.”

“Master, I don't know what's going on, but first off, congratulations!”

“Congrats!”

“Scram back right now!” Min-san glared at the many guys in black T-shirts, lined in a single file, and forwned.

“It's a joyous occasion, so let's drink up!” Pole was the first to speak up. Min-san ruled that the Hirasaka-gumi members were not allowed inside the shop, so everyone was seated outside on beer crates. Even so, that wasn't enough, and most of them could only order while standing up.

“I'll have some wedding ramen!”

“Wedding ramen too!”

“Me too!”

“Min-san, I don't know why, but 23 people ordered wedding ramen!”

Ayaka returned to the kitchen, saying so happily.

A furious Min-san prepared 23 bowls of terrifying ramen with lots of garlic topping (most likely, it's probably called wedding because it's completely white). However, those Hirasaka-gumi members were dumb, and their tongues were insensitive as they slurped up all the ramen delightfully. After finishing the ramen, they ordered beer and gyoza. It's only 5pm, and the doors of 'Hanamaru' suddenly became a monkey hill in a zoo. If I showed up, I would have been dragged off by them for some unbeneficial conversations, so I decided to hide in the kitchen.

“But who exactly is Master going to marry?” Rocky's voice could be heard.

“I heard it's the heir of a certain clan.”

“So isn't that referring to Narumi-aniki?”

“That's it!”

“Isn't aniki just 16?”

“You idiotic bastard, some big shot like aniki will be fine!” How's that fine!? Speaking of which, how did the misunderstanding up like like this?

The sun set, and the usual customers of real estate agents and used car dealer uncle were at the shop.

“Are you really getting married, Min-san?”

“So will the shop be closed?”

“I forced myself to finish the ramen here just to see your boobs, Min-san.”

“What did you say, you bastard?” Min-san angrily raised her chopper and swung it around. Employees from the companies nearby began to visit, and even a flower shop sent a flower ring for some reason. Until the last order time, the shop remained buzzing.

“Which idiot started spreading such rumors? That's enough already! Is it you, Narumi?”

After closing time, Min-san was busy washing the dishes, her face flushed red from anger, and I beside her could only shake my head frantically. The dirty plates and trash were 5 times the usual amount, and Ayaka alone wasn't enought o handle them all, so even I had to stay behind to clean up.

“Min-san, the talk about your marriage isn't real?”

Ayaka brought a whole stack of bowls over as she asked.

“Didn't I say that I don't have any intention of getting married? Hong Lei never mentioned it at all...”

“But if you're really going to marry that man, you won't be able to continue running the shop, right?”

Ayaka looked a little forlorn.

“Stop spouting nonsense and get to work! Where did Hiro go off to? I thought he'll work for real, and he's absent without a valid reason...”

“I couldn't get through with him on the phone either...” I answered. Since yesterday, I was unable to contact him.

“Most likely, the rumors were by Tetsu and Hiro. When I see them, I'm going to beat them up good. Narumi, don't you dare spread the rumors!”

But contrary to Min-san's expectations, the one who escalated matters further was actually Ayaka. Practically all the girls from class 2-4 came to the shop.

“Min-san, you really aren't going to run 'Hanamaru' anymore?'

“You can continue after your marriage.”

“We'll come by more often!”

“It's fine if you don't make ramen, but at least continue with the ice cream.”

Min-san replied impatiently,

“You girls are annoying. I'm not closing down. Hey Ayaka, come here for a while!”

“I-I just told everyone that the shop might close down.”

Min-san grabbed a scampering Ayaka, and flicked her forehead hard a few times, before summoning the girls into the kitchen and taught them how to make ice cream like usual. Hiro didn't show up again, so I had to prepare the ingredients.

That night, most of the customers visiting were female, cabaret girls, hostesses, office ladies, and high school girls.

“We huh from Hiro. Is this place really going to close down?”

“When are you getting married? Where's the ceremony?”

“Min-san, you should just get married with me.”

All kinds of customers entered the shop, and I couldn't help but wonder, the regular customers here really comee in all shapes and sizes! The night got darker, and there were not only street workers and security guards but even homeless wanderers coming all. In the end, all Min-san could do was to give a wry smile, and served up all kinds of ridiculous ingredients to serve the customers.

And upon closing time, I, Min-san and Ayaka were lined side by side at the basin, washing, wiping and keeping the utensils in order. At this moment, three shadows appeared ouside the metal shutters that were half closed.

“...Those idiots of mine caused you guys much trouble, didn't they?”

Yondaime was dressed in a fancy jacket as he ducked under the shutters and entered the shop. Following him were Testu-senpai and Hiro.

“What? Are you guys here to celebrate the closing of the shop or my marriage? I'm going to beat you up.”

Min-san puffed her cheeks, saying that,

“No, well, we never expected rumors to become that ridiculous.” Tetsu-senpai scratched his head, “I just had a chat with the uncle next to me when I was queuing at the pachinko parlor.”

“I just mentioned it carelessly at the research lab in college.” Major too was terrified.

At that moment, Min-san actually showed a smile, having worked out a sweat after some satisfying labor. She stopped herself from wiping, and looked around the greasy shop. Ayaka and I too followed her stare.

This was no longer a place Min-san simply inherited from her dad, but a shop she carefully protected and managed. To us, this was an irreplacable place.

“Oh yeah, where did Hiro go to? Those ladies of all professions must have came by because of his nonsense, right?'

“But we couldn't contact him at all.”

Tetsu-senpai shrugged, and sat on the guest cchair.

“Tetsu-san too?” Major said. We exchanged looks. Speaking of which, none of us have seen Hiro since two days ago. I thought of Hiro's figure that seemed to become transparent as he vanished, and even his voice when he called Alice to cancel the request sounded fractured.

“Where did he go...”

Ayaka's voice again caused everyone unrest.

“This is worrying. Is Alice able to track him on the GPS?” Tetsu-senpai asked. Right. There's that move, right? I gave Alice a call immediately.

“Him? ...Got it. I'll find out immediately.”

I waited slightly as I kept the line active, and heard an immediate response. *“Shinguku.”* Alice spoke on the other end of the phone.

“Shinjuku?”

I responded. My throat was parched, a little pricky.

“In Shimo-Ochiai. Hiro's phone is in Huang Hong Lei's house. Hurry!”

I gulped, and shut the phone.

“Hiro's in Hong Lei's house.”

Min-san widened her eyes.

“Sou, the car?” Min-san asked Yondaime, who nodded. Min-san leaped over the counter, “Get me there now. Hurry!”

I frantically gave chase after Min-san, and dashed out of the shop. Why—why did Hiro go look for Huang Hong Lei? When did he go? Two days ago, after he left? If that was really the case, did he stay there the entire time? A fearful premonition seemed to ooze out from my ears. The bandage on Xiao Ling-san chest, the thoroughly wounded boss of Matsugahara Tradings being beaten up, and the numbing taste of the knife jammed into my mouth; such terrifying memories became a dense vortex in the gloomy darkness.

Yondaime raced the Mercedes under the dim streets lights of the Shimo-Ochiai residential area, and stopped in the middle of an uphill road.

On the other side of the wall was the Huangs' residence shrouded in the darkness of the night, and the ominous cut was like a rotting elephant carcass. Min-san got out of the co-passenger seat, and sllammed hard at the interphone by the door.

The lights between the main gate and house doors lit up. After the gate was open, Huang Hong lei, dressed in an opened black shirt and a purple suit, walked down. He did not have slick hair this time, probably because he was on vacation, but that only served to emphasize the viciousness of his eyes. Once the door opened, Min-san immediately ran into the garden and grabbed Hong Lei by the corner.

“What? You haven't been at my house for quite a while, and now this is a passionate greeting...”

Hong Lei narrowed his cold eyes, saying so,

“Where's Hiro?”

“Oh? You tracked him down here already? He came in the evening, and is lying in the garage. Good timing, I can save the hassle of contacting you. Take him away, he's in my way.”

Min-san knocked aside Hong Lei, and sprinted to the right of the dim garden, while Yondaime and I hurriedly gave chase. The cool, intimidating footsteps from Hong Lei followed suit.

At the very end of the concrete slope leading underground was a shutter, and

Min-san pulled it up violently. Yondaime caught up, searched the entrance, and switched the lights on.

In front of us was a rather spacious garage. The spotlights gave a chilling glare, and there were two cars to the right, and one to the left, but there was enough space to hold a few more cars. What appeared to be a human was collapsed in the deepest part of the garage. Min-san and Yondaime went running over. I too instinctively hastened my steps.

“Hiro! Hey! Hiro!”

Min-san got on her knees and carried the collapsed Hiro, and the sight in front of me was bone-chilling. His cream colored jacket was covered in blood patches, and the source of it was obviously from his nose. Also, his eyebags and cheeks were swollen purple. He showed no reaction even when leaning on Min-san's thights, probably because he passed out. I remained rooted, unable to move. A set of footsteps went by me from behind. It was Hong Lei.

“Just a bare fisted confrontation. He won't die.”

“You bastard!”

Yondaime turned around, ducked low and stamped on the concrete floor. “Sou, stop it, you idiot!” Min-san yelled. I widened my eyes, dumbfounded by this unbelievable scene. I barely saw a punching motion from Yondaime; a feint with the right to Hong Lei's face, and the real target was a left to the chest. However, I couldn't see Hong Lei's punches at all. I felt an electric jolt-like power pass through Yondaime's elbow.

By the time I recovered, Yondaime was already on his knees in front of Hong Lei, his limbs quivering slightly.

“Wha...” A dumbfounded Yondaime eked out a voice of disbelief, while I couldn't even voice out. He dodged Yondaime's swift attacks, and even struck Yondaime with such precise strikes—probably on the shoulders.

He was trained in some special martial arts. At the very least, I could understand that.

“You idiot.” Min-san spat as she chided Yondaime. “You're no match for him. Are you looking to get killed? Hey Narumi, hurry up and bring Sou to the car!”

“...Eh, ah, y-yes.”

I ran over to Yondaime and carried him by the shoulder, and I found that his arm was still numbd. I tried my best not to meet Hong Lei, who was in front of me, right in the eyes, and supported Yondaime to his feet.

“Hong Lei...”

Min-san carried Hiro as she stood up, her eyes filled with a firm will.

“...You aren't planning to have me as a substitute fiancee, but looking to get married with me for real?”

Unexpectedly, Min-san's voice and expression had no anger in them. Hong Lei too stared right at Min-san's eyes without averting them.

“If I wasn't planning on that, I wouldn't have gone for a one on one duel with that small fry of a host, right?”

It took me a lot of strength to let out a heavy sigh. Why did Hiro come to this place alone? Did he really do it to see who could take Min-san's hand, for this really dumb reason?

“I won't be able to find a fine woman like you anywhere now. This is a great chance, of course I would do anything.”

At this moment, I felt a strange chill rising from deep within my abdomen, and strangely, there was some pleasantness in this chilling feeling. Hong Lei basically said the same words as Hiro.

Min-san looked down at the bloodied face in her clutches, and back at Hong Lei again.

Her face was smiling.

“In that case, are you prepared to run the ramen shop with me?”

And more shockingly, Hong Lei actually smiled back at Min-san.

“You said the exact same thing as that small fry of a host!”

I gasped.

“That idiot said that if I don't intend to run the ramen shop, he won't agree to our marriage. Who does he think he is? I'm going to be the one inheriting the

Huang Coalition, and I'm going to expand it to at least 5 times the present before attacking Hong Kong again. Ming Li, for this objective, I'll need your strength. I don't have the time to manage some ramen shop."

"...I see."

Min-san looked down at her toes. When she looked up again, her eyes were staring at me for some reason. In other words, at this detective assistant.

"Narumi, give Alice a call. Here's a request form me."

And Min-san said,

"Wreck this marriage."

Chapter 4

Hiro started plying his trade of fooling girls ever since he was in Middle School, and that the number of girls he caused to cry was in triple digits, so I heard. Of course, this number was going to increase, but it seemed there were a few exceptions. In other words, though they were rare in numbers, a few women would make amends with him again.

Like for example, Yi Ling-san.

“Seriously, I never thought you would actually do such a stupid thing, Hiro. What if there's a scar left on your face? Your livelihood depends on your face!”

Yi Ling-san continued to grumble, but she continued to change the bandages of Hiro, lying flat on the bed, and applied ointment on his wounds.

“Ow ow ow! Be gentle, Yi Ling. I was always being gentle to you on the bed!”

The swelling on Hiro's face never subsided, yet he was already joking.

“After I'm done with your wounds, shall I stitch your mouth?” Yi Ling-san narrowed her eyes.

“Then I won't be able to kiss you!”

“A light one will do. That's fine, right?”

It seemed they were playing slap and kiss. Also inside this cramped bedroom was my existence, so I really hoped that they show some restrain. It was a little old-fashioned, but I cleared my throat to remind the duo that I was present.

“So, can we have Hiro stay here under your care, Yi Ling-san?” I said as I scanned this apartment of two bedrooms and one living room. This was one of the rooms located beside the Embassy, called the Hello Palace, and the owner Yi Ling-san was a hostess from China, Hiro's ex-girlfriend. After some questioning, I

heard that Hiro had been here recently, asking everyone to investigate on the Hong Kong mafia, so naturally, he often ended up dating Yi Ling-san and living in her house. Looks like these two haven't learned anything...

“Didn't I just start a fight with Huang Hong Lei?” Hiro muttered. “After such a tough situation, you're the only one I can rely on, Yi Ling.”

Hiro nonchalantly touched the back of Yi Ling-san's arm as he said this, and she, who showed an impatient look, couldn't help but be flustered. This guy's a natural gigolo after all!

“Oh yeah, I heard that...Min-san, made a request to Alice?”

Hiro aside. I glanced aside at Yi Ling-san, and nodded without any doubt. Was it really fine to mention this in front of his ex?

“Speaking of whihc, Hiro, I heard you proposed to her?”

Right when I was feeling skeptical, Yi Ling-san suddenly took the initiative and attacked Hiro first.

“Hm? But when I propose to you, I'll definitely book a classy restaurant in Hilton beforehand!”

Ah, so this can be resolved just like this...I really learned quite a bit. No, I don't think this is necesary! “Enough already, you're always being so cheeky!” Yi Ling-san said as she stuck another gauss on Hiro's face, before wrapping up his naked chest with bandage again.

“So, what happened during the two days I passed out?”

Hiro exhaled, and asked me. Yi Ling-san too was sitting by the pillow on the bed, giving me a look that practically says, I have the right to know too, right? Of course, I didn't come here just to visit Hiro, but to brief him on the situation. However, where do I begin?

It had been two days since Hiro barged into Huang Hong Lei's house and got beaten up. Actually, a lot of things happened during two days.

First off, the detective agency began talking action because of Min-san's request. Tetsu-senpai and Major were going around in an unusually active

manner, but at thist moment, I had yet to hear of any specific plan.

Ultimately, Min-san decided to participate on the first day of our culture festival. November 3rd, the day Huang Hong Lei planned to hold the wedding. “Since Hong Lei intended to pull a fast one on me, I have no obligation to help him now, right?” so Min-san said. For Hiro, this was good news.

However, the biggest news would probably be that we received contact from Umeda Kouji.

“Umeda...that thug of a boyfriend?” Hiro asked.

The biggest cause to this incident was because Huang Hong Lei's actual fiancee—Huang Xiang Yu had a Japanese boyfriend, the man called Umeda Kouji.

“So he's still alive?”

“Yeah. I heard he went to Kove.”

Hanada Masaru pretended to kill Umeda Kouji, but in fact, had him escape to Kansai. It was said that the latter had been looking for a place to elope to, and just the previous day, he gave a call to Xiao Ling-san. Rather, it would be more precise to say that he gave a call to Huang Xiang Yu, who was audaciously within by Xiao Ling-san in the Zodiac Entertainment Company.

“From what Xiao Ling-san said, Umeda said something to the line of 'I'll be picking up Xiang Yu soon'.”

“What do they intend to do after they elope? Have they found jobs?” Hiro folded his arms, feeling quizzical. At this moment, Yi Ling-san, who remained silent the entire time, suddenly interrupted.

“That girl called Xiang Yu will go out to earn a living, right? There's a soapland in Fukuhara at Kobe.”

“Ehhh...then wouldn't that be a gigolo? That Xiang Yu is the princess of the Huangs. Ah, no, I don't have any intention to criticise you, Yi Ling-san.”

“I'm born in a poor family and background anyway.”

Yi Ling-san spat a tongue out at me, and then reverted back to a serious look.

“But, it doesn't matter even if she's a princess. Women are often a lot stronger

than men when it comes to being in an environment of no support. Even the Huang Coalition had to rely on the women to send their men over to Japan, and finally establishing their territory.”

“Is that so?”

Speaking of which, if I recalled correctly, she's from Hong Kong, right?

“These creatures called men will just die by the roadside if they sudden move to a place without any support, right? Women can continue living on even when alone. All men are just leechers.”

These words certainly seemed convincing, coming from Yi Ling-san.

“Even now, the situation remains the same. The Chinese women in Kabukicho outnumber men 5 to one!” Hiro said so proudly for some reason. “Most of them do all kinds of businesses, and have unstable incomes, so that's why they would work together and form a trust fund together.”

“Ahh, I heard about that from Min-san.”

The trust fund itself is a civilian style of financial system, a pool of money with contributions from everyone, that could be used by anyone in times of need. It's said that many Chinese ladies living in Japan participate in such funds. This fund itself was managed by the Huang Coalition, and was said to rival the major banks.

“I participate in one too!” Xiao Ling-san said. “I'm thinking that if I get married one day, I'll open a shop.”

So she intended to work in all kinds of professions to earn enough money to open a shop. That's dedicated of her. Why would such a firm-willed person be attracted by a scumbag like Hiro? This is really unbelievable. Hiro himself showed a perfect smile, answering,

“It's love!”

“What love?” Don't you talk to me about love! And you have the cheek to freeload here all you want. Yi Ling-san shot him a cold look.

However, Huang Xiang Yu really had no hesitation in betraying her mafia family just to elope with the man she loved. Maybe, like Yi Ling-san, she was prepared

to live on in a city of night life?

In any case, these aren't things I should be worrying about.

I walked out of Yi Ling-san's room, and heard quick footsteps coming from the other end of the corridor.

“Mr. Assistant, Mr Assistant!”

The voice of a girl of tender age reached me, and I found a brown shadow flinging at me.

“Wah!”

It was Meo, the Thai girl who lived in an apartment here together with her dad.

“This is bad this is bad! A lot of girls are trying to enter! It looks like they know that Hiro's here!”

“Ehh?”

Meo pointed at the outer corridor handrail, and I hurriedly poked my head out to look. There were a few cars parked in front of the apartment, forming a human sea of vibrant colors. I guess that's almost 20 of them? They're all females, and of different ages and profile. The only common point I had a bad feeling about, was that they were all finely dressed, holding paper bags and carriers. The chatter was mostly Chinese, it seemed, and I could only identify Yi Ling-san and Hiro's names.

“Meo told them already! Meo said that Hiro wanted Meo to keep it a secret and not let anyone know he's here! But they definitely wouldn't leave!”

If you say that, they're definitely not going back...

Finally, the many ladies finally become impatient and broke through the doors. I clearly heard a rash of fierce footsteps passing by below up, and they scaled the staircase, closing in on us. Seeing the massive army appearing on the other end of the corridor, Meo ducked behind me, cowering in fear.

“Hiro! Where's Hiro?”

“He's definitely hiding in Yi Ling's room, right? I head that he's hurt!”

“Why did he come over to Yi Ling's place? Didn't Hiro break up with her?”

“We're just here to visit him. Why chase him away?”

After observing from up close, I noticed that most of the furious looking ladies closing in seemed to be rich wives, and I nearly blurted, If he hides in your houses, you'll get caught by your husbands!

Hearing the conversations of mixed Japanese and Chinese, I could vaguely hear that a girl working in the same shop as Yi Ling-san leaked the news about Hiro. In other words, amongst the hundreds of lovers Hiro had, only the Chinese girls knew of his whereabouts. Guess this really is a silver lining. If everyone knew that he was here, Hello palace would end up in an endless hell.

“Well, Hiro's hiding here and told Meo not to say anything, so he's not here!” Meo said as she hid behind my back. I put a hand on my forehead, sighing. You should have just kept quiet.

“He doesn't spare such a young girl either?”

One of the madames was huffing her shoulders in fury, while Meo clung to my back tighly, swaying her twintails.

“That's not it! The only ones able to get Meo to confess are dad and Mr. Assistant!”

“Stop talking, Meo! This will only make things more complicated!”

I took a step forward, racking my brain at full speed as I thought of what I wanted to say. All I could do was pray that saying some logical words would convince them.

“Eh actually, Hiro's really injured badly. I guess he'll be very happy that everyone's here to visiit him, but you know, he really has a sense of responsibility. He'll definitely hear you out when he meets you, and might say that he'll take you out without caring about his own injuries. So, erm, if you really care about Hiro, can you please wait until his condition improves?”

I said as I looked up at the madames expressions. Their agitated looks obviously looked a lot more relaxed, and I discreetly heaved a sigh of relief.

“...Alright, I understand.”

“Well, I can relax if he's in Yi Ling's care.”

“Then, can we hand over our gifts to you?”

“Ah, sure.”

Hiro's lovers left a large pile of gifts even I couldn't handle fully, and finally returned back. It's common to see melons and Muscat graps, but there were also Asian Ginseng, Cordyceps, snake gallbladder, fois gras and crab oil. Rather than have him recover, I wonder--

“Mr Assistant, Mr Assistant. How do I read these words?”

Meo pointed at the box of Chinese medicine with the words 'peerless vitality', asking me,

“Meo, it's alright for you not to know how to read this...”

I got the feeling that handling these matters alone were tiring me out.

I turned around to nudge the door sidely, seeing Yi Ling-san put her hands together and telling me, 'thank you'.

Outside the back door of 'Ramen Hanamaru' was an unapproachable atmosphere.

The gap between the buildings was narrow enough, and at this point, there were massive 3-4 figures clad in T-shirts, members of the Hirasaka-gumi;

“Aniki, good work!”

“Good work!”

Upon seeing me approach the shop, the few of of them came to me and greeted me. The shop was yet to begin business at 4pm; Ayaka and the other girls from my class were wearing the school sailor uniforms like usual, with aprons on, happily making ice cream. The atmosphere inside and outside the shop was really different; it felt that my left eye was seeing a different world altogether.

“Nothing strange at the moment!”

“With the few of us over here, we're like an iron wall.”

“If anyone approaches the shop, we'll beat them all up and shoo them off!”

Now no customers will die to approach.

“Ah, erm, have the guys from the Huang Coalition watching this stretch?”

I had the Hirasaka-gumi send a few over to avoid anyone from obstructing the business. The few guys in black T-shirts nodded.

“Haven't seen anyone today.”

“But they did come by yesterday.”

“Their faces were obviously Chinese.”

“In that case, please continue to be on the lookout.”

I stepped on the emergency staircase, and suddenly, light footsteps were running up to me.

“Fujishima-kun!”

Ayaka caught up to me at the stairwell.

“Min-san said that she'll be coming on the first day of the culture festival, but is that fine? Does she have any issues with her family?”

“Ah, yeah”

I was a little hesitant, not knowing how much I should explain to Ayaka.

“It's fine! She definitely won't cause our classmates much trouble.”

“That's not what I'm worried about! I'm worried about Min-san and you, Fujishima-kun.”

I shrank my neck back.

“Sorry, but I'm really fine...”

I wasn't confident at all, but this was all I could only answer.

“Is there anything you need my help with?”

Ayaka was being so close, her knees were practically touching mine as she earnestly said this.

“No, Ayaka. There's nothing you can—” I was about to reply this, but was

startled by Ayaka's serious expression, and suddenly thought of something. “Ah, right, there seems to be something. Well, about the one in charge of food hygiene, does the person need to be present all day?”

“Eh? Probably not? Right now, I'm not too sure...”

Min-san just needed to show up if someone was to inspect, and at other times, it's safer to hide her. Nobody knew whether the Huang Coalition would take action.

“I'll clarify with the committee. Anything else?'

“Anything, erm...” There's nothing I thought of, so I said half-jokingly, “Personally, I hope that we can have tiramisu in the menu.”

“Got it!” Ayaka flipped her apron as she tettered down the stairs lightly.

Obviously, Alice was being unhappy.

“I never thought that everyone would be so focusing on breaking up; where have we abandoned our pride as NEET detectives at?”

The tapping at the keyboard sounded like an ice block being shaved. We were entering late October, and the temperature had decreased quite a bit. Even if it was to match the temperature outside the room, the air conditioning in the detective agency was a lot colder than usual. Only recently did I realize this, that when Alice was feeling moody, she would set the air conditioning temperature to a very low level.

“Tetsu and Major said that they wanted to forge proof of Master's divorce, or that they'll throw tear gas at the ceremony. They were even planning this so seriously that they went off to scout the location! This is too unbecoming of them!”

“But you're now working for Min-san's now, aren't you, Alice?'

“It's not for Master. Shouldn't I have just rejected that kind of request straight away?” Alice continued to turn her back on me. “What I'm investigating now is for Hiro's request.”

I sighed.

Alice's definition of a NEET detective was one who dug for the truth, to be the speaker of the dead. That was why she would not accept requeststst a private investigator would take up, like wrecking marriages. Despite this, Alice continued tapping at the keyboard, all for the sake of Hiro's request.. No, to be precise, for the request she asked Hiro to make.

This strange girl really had all kinds of self-restraining rules in her lives. She wouldn't take action until there was a request, and that itself was another shackle she placed on herself. The truth a detective finds would dig up, decipher and sculpt a certain person's life, and create a fatal change.

Furthermore, Alice had an obsessive concept—though I didn't know if this was the right way to put it—anyway, she had a strong fear of the unknown. Sometimes, this would sink her into despair, and she might even crumble.

That was why Alice had to beg Hiro to make a request to her.

“Alice, do you really just want to know what's up with Hanada Masaru?”

“Haven't I said this countless times already?”

Alice dejectedly noted.

“I have no interest in such a stupid wedding commotion. The only thing that attracts me is Hanada Masaru. I have no idea of that man's intentions, his whereabouts. What does he intend to do? I really have no idea.”

And I didn't know why Alice was so obsessed with Hanada Masaru. It was infuriating that he created this unavoidable mess, and I couldn't agree with him dragging his own daughter down even if it's to help someone else elope. However, it appeared Alice wasn't obsessed about that.

But that there was a firmer discord.

The crux to this issue was likely to be Xiao Ling-san.

I too felt that she had some unspeakable doubt to her. She was not a party involved, yet was so closely involved in this, and I couldn't determine her actual objective, or how did she intend to direct this scenario to a certain outcome. Furthermore, she didn't seem to have any malice to her, which made things more uncomfortable.

“The fact Huang Xiao Ling's hiding is likely to be the crux to this incident. However, it appeared she already knew that this hacker here exists. As to be expected of the Zodiac syste developer. I couldn't investigate on news about Hanada Masaru no matter where I struck. Even the call log Hanada Masaru made was hidden by her with some unknown method...”

This too was another reason why Alice was frustrated. The NEET detective had always been invincible in the ocean of electronics, only to be on her back foot in the face of a network security specialist.

Alice suddenly lifted her head to look at a monitor high up a rack, and on it was the simple Zodiac portal site. Every month, the site logo would switch constellations, and at this point, it changed from Libra to Scorpio. October would be over, and soon after, the culture festival.

“However, I do have some clues on Hanada Masaru's whereabouts.” Alice muttered.

“Eh?”

I inadvertently leaned my upper body forward while holding the frame of the bed. This was the first time on this day that Alice turned back to look at me, the faint smile on her face clearly showing reluctance and fatigue.

“Do you remember the doctor Hanada Masaru went to on that night? The family name's Choi, a Korean doctor without a license. I tracked down his whereabouts.”

“You're amazing...”

“Found it in a jiffy. He booked a ticker on the internet, and two days after the incident, flew to Hong Kong.”

Hong Kong. Why Hong Kong?'

“Back to the Huangs' headquarters.”

“That's not the Huangs' headquarters, or it can be said that it's the most suitable place on Earth to hide from the Huangs. The Huang Coalition lost territory in the clan wars, and was finally removed from the Hong Kong Triad, chased out of their hometown.. This means that practically all of them moved to

Japan. The territory, headquarters and houses were practically taken over by an enemy force called the Bengya Association[6].”

Right, I believe Huang Hong Lei said something similar too, that he wanted to expand the Huang Coalition in Japan several times before counter attacking on Hong Kong again.

“So Hanada Masaru went to Hong Kong as well?”

“That's a likely possibility.”

Alice again turned back to face the screen.

And then? I swallowed those words.

If he really flew to Hong Kong, then not only would the Huang Coalition be unable to do anything, but the NEETs who could only grumble in a corner of Tokyo couldn't do anything either, and it was pointless to inform anyone of this.Even if we were to tell Min-san, you can relax now, you r dad is in Hong Kong where nobody can catch him, I didn't think she would be happy about that either.

No matter how unbearable the truth might be, Alice had no qualms in digging it out.

“I know...”

Alice mutttered. It seemed her voice was unable to withsand the cold air too, and was about to be snapped apart.

“Actually, I know very well in my heart that this fact is just firewood for a cremation. A detective can't possibly do anything for the living.”

I merely shook my head. Alice could not see. Even though she denied it, I had no choice but to admit, till this point, Alice saved me several times, but no matter how much I tried to express it, it was useless. In fact, I mentioned it to her several times, but my feelings probably never touched the inner most part of her heart.

Why was that?

I did not speak up, and merely stared at the petite figure under the black hair, quietly asking,

Why must she lock herself in this cramped, cold glass shoe-like place? Why must you always wait so bitterly for the dawn that would never come? What exactly robbed the rhythm of life from her petite body, and swapped it for the premonition of death?

I counted my pulse in the breeze blown by the airr conditioning, seeking the suitable words.

“Alice, that's...”

The shoulders beneath the blue pajamas shook beyond the curtain of black hair.

“Can you think of Min-san's request as being accepted by me? Besides, I'm a member of the agency...”

I uttered these words one by one, peering at Alice's back.

“...And also, when we have lots of cases in the future, we can work together. Won't that be convenient? Maybe you can leave some of the work to this subordinate of yours.”

Alice shook her head slightly.

“Whatever!”

This isn't it, Alice,, I didn't mean that. It'll be meaningless. If I'm to do anything by myself, nothing will change. Even if it's a little trick. I hoped to be the link between Alice and this world.

“Can't just let me do whatever I want. You need to command me as the leader.”

“You're too noisy!”

Alice shook her long hair as she turned her head around.

“Speaking of which, didn't you say that! I rejected this request already, so now —”

Once Alice's eyes met mine, she was suddenly at a loss of words. Her large eyes reflected my earnest expression, and I knew that a certain truth behind my lousy lie was figured out. Her pale face was like a brand new candlestick, and at this

moment, it was slightly reddened. She seemed a little sorry as she lowered her head.

I hesitated slightly for a while, and continued,

“If it's not work you ordered us to do, the payment Min-san gives will be split equally between Major, Tetsu-senpai and me. Is that okay?”

Alice grabbed the doll lying beside her, one, another, and another one. She hugged the dolls in front of her chest, blocking her reddened face as she answered,

“Didn't I tell you not to taunt me in such a stupid manner? Now I'm embarrassed!”

“Hm...then shall I be a little more honest? I think you're important to me, Alice, so, even if it's just to encourage you, I hope—”

Alice continued to flail her legs, and grabbed another two dolls to hug.

“Argh, I'm getting embarrassed here as well...”

I guess...even I'm starting to be embarrassed too.

“Whatever. You only pay attention to such details in such unnecessary places, and careless in important moments. Since you're going to handle it as a job the agency accepted, all the reward goes to me, and you all will just accept your meager pay that's lesser than alms! Explain this to Tetsu and Major!”

I held in the urge to broke out a grin, and nodded before I stood up.

“Got it. Thanks.”

“Why are you thanking me?”

Alice again turned her back on me in a huff, and through her long hair, I could only see her reddened ears. However, right when I got up and was about to exit the door, Alice again called me with a stern tone,

“About that Doctor Choi...”

“Hm?” I turned my back back. What about that?

“Go tell Huang Hong Lei about that.”

“Er, eh, why?”

Wouldn't that basically be telling the Huangs about the clues to Hanada Masaru? Maybe Huang Hong Lei would have secretly agreed to have his fiancee elope on him, but he might not let Hanada Masaru go, right? This concerned the Huangs' pride after all.

“The Huangs can't do anything in Hong Kong right now. I think I have a rough gauge on Hanada Masaru's intentions too.”

Surprised, I walked back to the bed.

“...What do you mean? Didn't you say that you don't understand his objectives at all?”

“I don't know what he's intending to do! But I know what he wants us to do. Think about what happened in April. That guy had plastic surgery to alter his appearance, and even avoided all the surveillance cameras around and in the building so that we couldn't catch him. He was so cautious interacting with us, and yet there are too many signs in this case.”

“Uu...”

Speaking of which, that certainly seemed to be the case..

“He didn't just give a phone call to Huang Xiao Ling, but also called you and had you record his voice. He abandoned the bloodied car after escaping to that hospital, and left records when he booked the plane ticket for the doctor. Even if it was carelessness due to the suddenness of the situation, these acts were too carelss of him. It's almost unnatural. I feel that it was deliberate of him.”

“Deliberate?”

'”Hanada Masaru's is making use of us through Huang Xiao Ling, so we can just reveal any filtered information to the Huang Coalition.”

“Erm...”

Was it possible to really do that?

It was true that we managed to track down Hanada Masaru a little earlier, and knew of the truth that happened that night, so we managed to avoid the worst case scenario, that of the Huangs knowing that Huang Xiang Yu was still alive. It

wasn't implausible however. As long as we report, the only one knowing the truth would be Huang Hong Lei himself. But this was just a guess.

“I can't eliminate the possibility that it's just a guess. A man as amazing as Hanada Masaru probably wouldn't have to spend so much effort to escape to Hong Kong and manipulate the information from afar. Even if he stayed in Tokyo, there's a while to help others to elop and protect 'Hanamaru'. In any case however, reality's reality. He's not here now. It's an unplesant feeling to be moving and controlled on his end however.”

“If we tell Hong Lei that the doctor flew to Hong Kong, what'll happen next?”

“At the very least, the Huang Coalition will divert its attention to Hong Kong, and the watch here will be relaxed.”

The problem was that even if they turned their attention away, they couldn't send so many people back to Hong Kong just to find Hanada Masaru, right? That wouldn't be too meaningful, would it? Or did he have another objective to this?

Seriously, this was really troublesome. Why did Hanada Masaru run away! He's an amazing mercenary, so in that case, he should at least take some risk to come back and explain to Min-san, right? It's because he wouldn't show that that we're being stifled here!

My impatience wiltered in the stiff winds of the air conditioning.

Finally, Alice lifted her head and looked at me with a stoic look.

“Anyway, it's your choice as to whether you want to inform them. This is your case now.”

I boldly declared that I was going to accept Min-san's request, but I didn't know whether to inform Huang Hong Lei of the doctor's whereabouts, even until the next day after school. In that end, i had to discuss this with Tetsu-senpai and Major at the back door of the shop, which made me feel helpless.

“It's doesn't matter, right? Just tell him! Masaru-san will definitely be able to do something. Even if a hundred of those mafia goons are to go find him, they'll definitely just be sent back all shaved and packed in containers.”

Tetsu-senpai answered with a relaxed tone.

“Haa...”

Senpai spent the longest time here at 'Hanamaru'. It seemed he knew best how amazing Hanada Masaru was.

“I agree.” Major chimed in too. “As Alice said, the Huang Coalition will divert their attention. Even if there are people staying behind to investigate that hospital or keep watch there, there'll be fewer numbers. It'll be easier for us to begin our operation.”

“Begin operation...what do you mean?”

With a beaming smile on his face, Major opened a small notebook computer. The screen showed the blueprint of a certain building or something.

“Right now, we're still investigating any possible entry routes and target locations...”

“W-wait wait wait, what do you mean by entry? What building is this?”

Why are you asking such a question? Major's face was practically crying this out.

“We're checking on all the companies under the Huangs and the Zodiac! Won't things be settled if we steal the documents that proved Master's loan?”

“That definitely won't work!”

We don't know where they're hidden, and furthermore, this is criminal, isn't it?

“You're right...” Senpai nodded. I was about to say that it's a good thing this guy wasn't as immoral as Major, but he unexpectedly followed up with, “I'm still able to handle opponents wielding Qinglong swords, but facing handguns will be a little problematic...”

“Both are tough to deal with! Anyway, that's not the problem!”

I slammed Major's computer hard, and he curled his lips like an elementary school kid.

“It's fine as long as we aren't found out!”

“You idiot, you'll definitely be found out!”

A voice suddenly rang from the kitchen's back door, and Major nearly rolled over from the old tire he was sitting on. Unbeknowst to us, Min-san opened the door and poked her head out.

“Say, I did make the request, but I'm not telling you to do anything criminal.”

“No, but that's the easiest way.” Major was about to say, only to be smacked by Min-san.

“I want to continue running 'Hanamaru'! I prefer my current lifestyle now. What can you do when you steal and forge documents? That'll make the Huangs more unwilling to let me go, right?”

Min-san's proper words were right on the money, and I thoroughly realized we need people like her around us to remind us.

“What do you intend to do, Narumi?”

Tetsu-senpai asked, and Major too turned towards me. Even Min-san did.

“Alice doesn't want to handle the request, so you're now taking over, Narumi? I heard from Alice yesterday. How are we going to take action anyway?”

I leaned my back on the wall, and slowly slid down, before squatting on the damp dirt, sagging my shoulders. My boastful words from before left me with no choice but to think of a solution. I didn't have that kind of time on hand, but I spent an entire day just thinking of whether I should provide the information to Hong Lei.

In the end, I didn't think of anything.

“So Min-san, let's give up on the plan A to steal the document, and go with plan B, right?” Major.said.

“What's the plan B?”

“Get married with Hiro as soon as possible. Then you won't be able to get married with Huang Hong Lei, right?”

“Are those all the stupid ideas you can think of? Hong Lei will just add another request for me to 'get a divorce'. Think harder.”

“I thought it was a good plan...”

Tetsu-senpai too felt dejected.

“Oh yeah, where did Hiro go?” Min-san suddenly asked. “After that incident, I handed him over for Sou to handle, and now he's playing dumb with me. Which hospital is he at now? He should be fine, right? Did he get hammered in the head too much?”

“Ahh...”

Tetsu-senpai and I exchanged glances. We had to keep Hiro's current whereabouts a secret from Min-san; this was something we realized we didn't have to talk about. That guy went to propose to Min-san, and now he's hiding in another woman's house...

After seeing us give ignorant looks, Min-san said.

“Haa, I guess he's probably staying at some woman's place.”

“Eh? N-no, that's not true...Hiro didn't go to any woman's place, and well, Yondaime had him at a doctor he knew. That doctor has a complicated background, so we kept it a secret and didn't tell you...”

“Narumi, you really can't lie. Mind realizing that?”

Min-san shot me down with that one line. Major and Tetsu-senpai gave up on trying to lie and cover this up as they reined back their necks.

“Whatever. His wounds aren't that serious, right?”

“...Eh? Ah, yeah...he's a lot better now.”

So much better that he's able to say some cheesy lines to his ex, I nearly blurted.

“Good enough then. Next time, when I see him, I'm going to beat him up good.”

Min-san lectured everyone, but as she returned to the kitchen, she looked over her shoulder, saying,

“I'll leave it to you guys think of some way to get me out of this.”

The ice cream making lessons our class 2-4 girls were participating in finally

ended yesterday, and the preparations for the ramen shop finally gained some peace. The school festival loomed, and everyone was in the classroom, helping to decorate. On this day, Ayaka had to stay till late at school, so I had to come and help open the shop.

And because of that, when business started at 5pm, a rare customer came.

“Welcome—”

I greeted the figure ducking under the curtain and into the shop, and at the next second, I was rooted in shock.

Walking in was Huang Hong Lei, with slick hair, sharp eyes, a dark colored suit under his suite coat, and a bright opened sleeved shirt. Furthermore, what was surprising, or if I thought hard about it, wasn't really surprising, was the other person behind Hong Lei—Xiao Ling-san. The latter was holding what appeared to be a large, flat box.

“What? You came to this shop...”

Min-san walked out from the corridor, asking in confusion, Xiao Ling-san stood behind a stoic looking Hong lei, glanced aside at me, and whispered to Min-san. “Sorry for coming uninvited...”

Hong Lei took the box from Xiao Ling-san's hands, and opened the lid slightly.

“This is the custom made dress. Just made today.”

Min-san merely glanced at the box.

“Sorry, but I don't need to wear this. Didn't I say that I'm attending the school festival on that day?”

Was that the dress to be worn at the wedding ceremony? I noticed it slightly. Speaking of which, back then, when Min-san was called over by Hong Lei, did they have it custom tailored back then? Back when Min-san was in the dark, naively thinking that she was just a substitute.

“I don't care what you intend to do on that day. I'll be picking you up at 11.”

Min-san had already stated it so clearly, yet Hong Lei placed the box on the counter, and showed the content within. As he was pinching the side and pulling it out slightly, I only see the shoulders and the torso part, but I could

immediately tell that the purple dress was of top notch quality.

“Why not a Chinese dress...”

“Even though we're Chinese, we don't have to be wearing that, right?”

“But is that able to support Master's huge breasts?”

“I think she needs to wear a cosette underneath.”

Tetsu-senpai and Major peeked in from the gap in the backdoor, and Min-san heard their chatter, looking furious as she slammed the back door hard, and turned back to Hong Lei.

“How did you explain it to the guests? Nobody had anything to say when you said you're going to bring me along?”

“It was originally a ceremony where I announced as the Hong Lord. The wedding's just a side event.”

The Hong Lord here would refer to the leader of a Chinese mafia. In a larger organization, there's the Dragon Head who's higher ranked than the Hong Lord, and at this point, the Hong Lord is the equivalent of a Japanese yakuza lord. Because of this case, I learned a lot of unnecessary knowledge.

“I'll just introduce you to the guests as the granddaughter of the Dragon head, since that's a fact. Practically nobody in Japan knows your background, or Xiang Yu, so there's no real need to explain.”

“What about grandfather and the others?”

“The Dragon Head was really positive about it, especially since he never took a particular liking to Xiang Yu, and preferred you instead. My father and grandfather weren't too willing, but since only I can take over the Huang Coalition, nobody can grumble. Once lunch's over, it'll be a meeting with the relatives, and you'll have to show up. I'll make sure everyone accepts you at the wedding.”

“But I'll grumble!”

“At that moment, you won't.”

Xiao Ling-san appeared to be sighing. Min-san merely shrugged.

“Whatever. You got nothing else for me, right? If so, hurry up and scram. Don't stop me from opening my shop and doing business.”

“No...”

Hong Lei kept the clothing back in the box, closed the box, and sat down by the counter.

“Serve something. I'm here as a customer.”

I inadvertently widened my eyes, yet Min-san pretended to remain calm as she asked,

“What are you planning exactly?”

“This shop's going to close because of me. Thus, I have an obligation to taste the flavor here?”

Min-san turned her eyes to the entrance of the ramen shop.

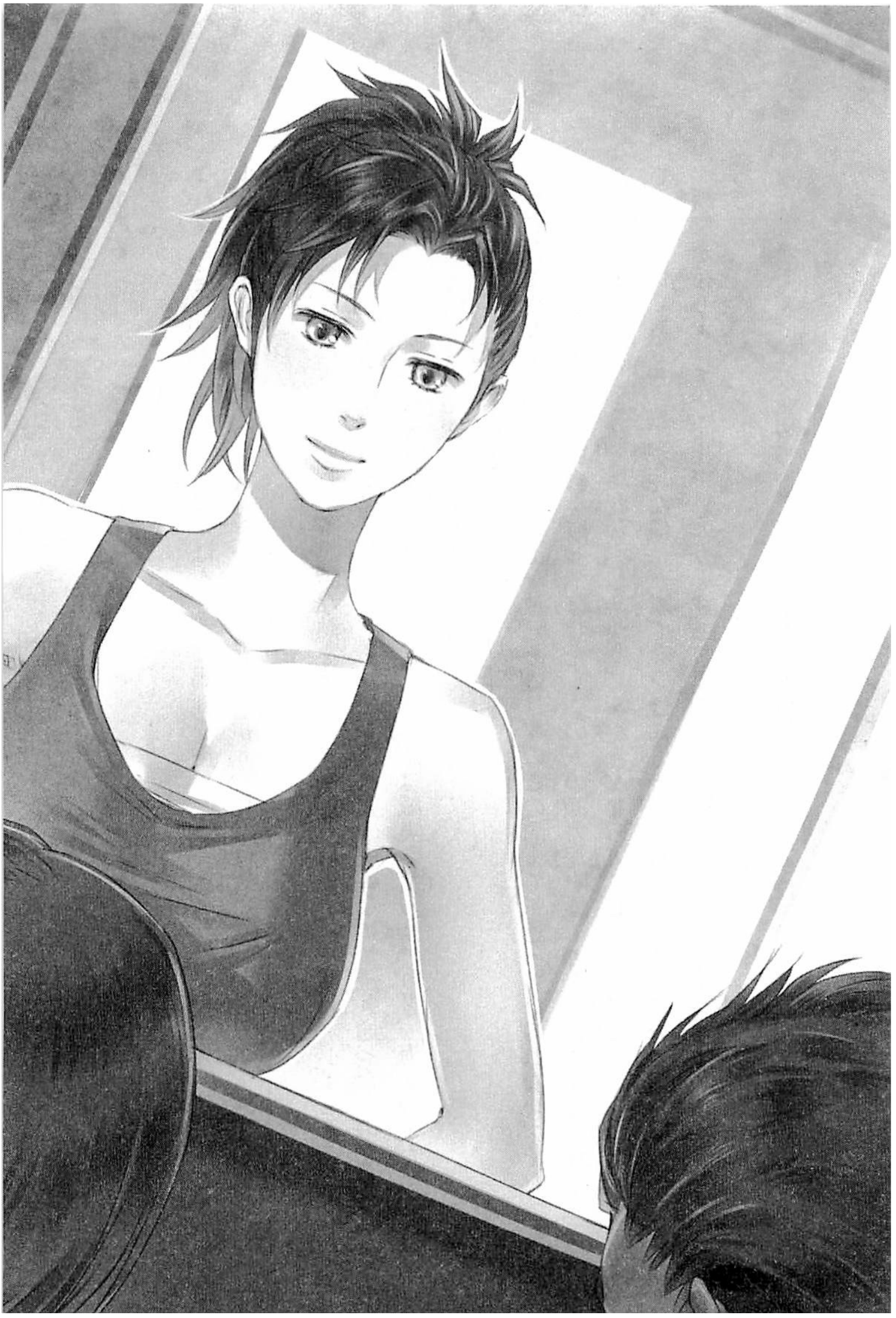
“You too, Xiao Ling?”

“...yeah, it's a rare chance.”

A conflicted look remained on Xiao Ling-san's face, and she sat down beside Hong Lei.

The next 20 minutes was likely the most surreal time I ever experienced working in 'Hanamaru'. The siblings who were to inherit a mafia were seated on relatively unclean, cramped counter seats, and Min-san was opposite them, watching the noodle strands fly in the boiling water, while I was beside her, tentatively preparing the roasted pork, the boiled onions, and chopped green onions.

“Kept you waiting.”



Min-san served two bowls of soy sauce ramen, and Hong Lei practically finished one entire bowl in one shot. Beside him, Xiao Ling-san was slowly moving her chopsticks, yet he finished even the stock in the soup, down to the very last bit.

“The flavor now feels different from Masaru's.”

Hong Lei muttered as he put down the bowl. I stared at Min-san face from the side in shock.

“You ate my dad's ramen before?” Min-san asked.

“Xiao Ling and I knew him for a longer time than you do. I ate the ramen he cooked a few times when I was a brat.”

“...I see.”

“If he's to eat this, he'll definitely be happy. Such a fool.”

Hong Lei waited for Xiao Ling-san to finish, and get up, put a few notes and coins on the counter, and put on his coat.

I simply felt some unknown heat burning deep within my heart. Huang Hong Lei was supposed to be a man who would kill anyone if he found it to be necessary, yet I saw something so clear and transparent in his heart. If I were to express it in a word, it could only be described as 'sincerity'. Maybe, on the other end of the sea, there's a better term that would describe this unique characteristic.

So I hesitated.

Just this current situation alone cornered me, and in fact, I didn't have the time to worry about the man who was supposed to be our enemy. However, I couldn't help but think, if we're to wreck Min-san's wedding, this guy will be utterly humiliated, right? I'm an idiot. Got to pull myself together. How can I be worried about the enemy?

But right when I peeked at Min-san from the corner of my eye, I found that she seemed to be thinking the same things as I did, for she was staring at the back of the coat that was holding the curtain up, about to leave the shop.

“Erm...”

I called out without thinking. Xiao Ling-san, who was about to get up, looked and me, and Hong Lei too turned his head back.

“...Ah, ahh, erm.”

I was so nervous, the words that were stuck in my throat were finally squeezed out.

“We might be able to find out where Masaru-san is. That doctor flew to Hong Kong.”

Hong Lei's response was unexpectedly calm, and I could clearly hear Min-san gulp.

“Hong Kong? Humph...”

I ducked under the counter, and chased after Hong Lei out of the shop.

“Aren't you going to send people after him?”

“I'll do that without you telling me to do it. I don't know what you're planning, but my plans won't change.”

I lowered my shoulders dejectedly. He's right; it'll definitely take a lot of time if he couldn't send lots of people back to Hong Kong. By then, even if they did find Hanada Masaru, Hong Lei would have gotten married with Min-san, and 'Hanamaru' would close down.

So, what was the purpose of that?

As Alice had said, it was a mean Hanada Masaru was using to manipulate information, but what was he—

The answer soon came. Huang Hong Lei was about to drive the car off, only to reach for his cellphone in the inner pocket of his suit, giving a perturbed expression.

“Yes...Huang Hong Lei speaking...Masaru? Is that you, Masaru?”

I was taken aback, or rather, I felt something a bit off about it. Hanada Masaru? Did that man really call? Why would Hanada Masaru choose to contact Huang Hong Lei at such a moment? Did he really have an eye on everything, and was watching us from the opposite coast?

“Why are you calling from the main family's phone...oh...I see. The Bengya Association? You're thinking that I won't be able to take action in Hong Kong?”

I heard some footsteps, and turned back to look. Min-san came running out of the shop.

“Hey! Did my dad call? Hey! Hong Lei!”

Hong Lei glanced aside at Min-san, nodding as he continued to talk on the phone.

“...Ha. I understand. I'll let you do whatever you want for the time being. However, I won't be staying in Japan forever. Remember, once I land on Kowloon again, that day will be your day!”

Min-san snatched the cellphone from Hong Lei's hands, and placed it by her ear.

“Dad! Where are you? In Hong Kong!?...I know that. Stop joking around. Are you an idiot? You're still worrying about others...for such a stupid reason! Hey,, hey! What nonsense are you saying? Dad! ...dad!”

Gasping, Min-san reigned in her urge to yell, and once the phone call was over, she stuffed the phone back into Hong Lei's hands.

“I give up. Forget about that guy. Just think of him as dead already.”

Min-san muttered with an utterly repressed voice.

“This is my shop, and it got nothing to do with that man now. I'm definitely not going to let this shop close.”

The frown on Hong Lei's forehead eased slightly, and he continued,

“The wife of the Hong Lord is very busy, but if you insist to continue keeping the ramen shop running, just hire people. Your ramen tastes won't vanish completely.”

“You really don't understand me.”

Min-san showed a faint smile.

At this moment, two construction workers and a few tired looking salarymen in suits were chatting and laughing as they crossed the road.

“Oh? What now? Still busy?”

“You haven't opened the shop yet, Min-san?”

“I'm so hungry that I'm all weak here!”

“It's fine, come in and wait. I'll get ready immediately.” Min-san ushered the customers into the shop, and merely turned back to look at Hong Lei.

“To be honest, if you had said that you wanted to run the ramen shop with me, I would have considered it a little.”

Leaving those words, Min-san's ponytail vanished behind the curtain, and Xiao Ling-san walked out.

“...Let's go, Hong Lei,.” Xiao Ling-san grabbed her older brother's arm to prompt him to drive. She passed by me, and again glanced at me, seemingly intent on wanting to say something.

It was later that night when I was briefed by Alice of the contents of that phone call. Alice hacked into Hong Lei's phone, and extracted the call record.

After the audio was played, Alice and I never recovered for a while as we heard the sound of the air-conditioner buzzing. All I felt was the fatigue seemingly about to trickle out for my ears along with my blood.

“The call log definitely originate from Hong Kong...”

Alice muttered, breaking the deadlock.

“It was called from the Huangs' old residence in Kowloon Tasi. But...this kind of phone call is easy to fake.”

“In other words...Hanada Masaru betrayed the Huangs and defected to the enemy?”

“If we believe what he says, then yes...”

The Huangs' house in Hong Kong was occupied by a rival group called the Bengya Association, and Hanada Masaru called Huang Hong Lei from the phone there.

Hanada Masasru was a mercenary, and had relationships with mafias

everywhere. He probably defected to the enemy with intel on the Huang Coalition, and served under them. Truly, this was an unscrupulous betrayal.

“The truth doesn't matter now.”

Alice's wavering eyes turned towards me.

“Anyway, there's only one thing he wants to tell the Huangs, and he has already escaped to a place they can't get to him.”

Alice revealed that the whereabouts of the doctor who flew to Hong Kong, and that made things much more convincing.

“But here's the problem.”

Alice suddenly said, and I, pondering deeply, lifted my head.

“...Where?”

“This is the strangest part to me. Don't you find the timing to be too coincidental?”

“Timing?”

“You informed Huang Hong Lei of the news that the doctor went to Hong Kong, and then Hanada Masaru, who was supposed to be in Hong Kong, called immediately, right in front of Master...”

I folded my arms, and groaned. Speaking of which, that certainly seemed to be the case.

“There might be another catch to this. The timing's too coincidental, it's intriguing.”

“You're saying that...Hanada Masaru might still be in Japan?”

“That's a possibility.”

Not only in Japan, but even observing the actions of Min-san and the Huangs, and calling occasionally to control the entire situation? If that really was the case, then it's a bigger question mark as to what Hanada Masaru was really planning.

“Well, whatever. Huang Xiao Ling continues to remain clammed up, but Huang Hong Lei has a few weaknesses to capitalize on. I'll continue investigating, and

you just need to do your work.”

My work...

I cupped my legs as I stayed by the side of the bed. Alice suddenly stopped typing and turned her head back to look at me, looking a little displeased as she narrowed her eyes.

“I guess you still have no idea of the work you took responsibility for.”

“Eh?”

“If we can't finish the request and receive the payment from Min-san, we still need to pay Tetsu and Major their salaries. That money is going to come from you since you agreed to it so brazenly! Once you understand, get up. And throw the empty cans outside!”

I was given a verbal lashing, and I hurriedly stood up, cleaned up the empty cans of Dr Pepper scattered all over the bed and carried them in my clutches. I left the agency, and leaned on the door, sighing.

It seemed senpai and Major were serious in trying to use illegal means to get rid of the loan evidence. Even Hiro too was going around, trying to amass money when he just recovered a little. I wanted to say, stop, these ideas won't work! But I couldn't think of any alternatives. Did I really have the right to stop them?

3 days later, Umeda Kouji returned to Tokyo. It was early in the morning on a holiday, and I was woken up by Yondaime on the phone, so I could only move out to the Hirasaka-gumi office.

“Morning, aniki!”

“Goodwork!”

Almost all the members were squeezed inside the small room, and Yondaime to stood up from the desk.

“Things are as how I explained to you on the phone just now. Who do you think is most suitable as bait?”

I did a rough scan of the black T-shirted guys, and chose someone most similar

to Min-san in body size, and another two as smokescreen.

Yondaime nodded, and brought the 3 chosen people out of the office along with me.

“Where's Min-san?” I asked as I went down the stairs.

“I gave her a call.”

“Is there a need to protect her with that much effort?”

“It's possible that there are mafia members keeping watch on 'Hanamaru'.”

I see. If they realized what was going on and tailed us, there would be a chance of the news being leaked. Better be careful just in case.

The 5 of us sat in a wagon car, and we drove off to 'Hanamaru'.

It was a bright morning, and the slightly dirtied buildings and concrete bridge looked so dazzling. The rare few pedestrians had their hands on the front of their coat, their backs arched as they walked down the street. The car windows became foggy in an instant. October was about to end, and Autumn was about to descend into Winter.

We reached the ramen shop, and didn't enter from the front entrance, but to the residence entrance at the back of the building. I brought the 3 guys in black T-shirts into Min-san's house, and she too walked out from the corridor.

“Good morning, Master!”

“Good morning!”

“Be quiet, you idiot! Where's my T-shirt?”

I handed a black Hirasaka-gumi T-sirt over to Mind. On that day, Min-san had her sarashi tied really tightly, and the busty chest really left large lumps on the shirt. She put down her hair into the collar, and put on the gang's baseball cap. In other words, she was disguising herself as one of the members. I wonder if this disguise could work.

The remaining two members flanked Min-san in the middle, and the trio walked out at the same time. We quickly sat in the wagon car at the parking lots in the back, and Yondaime immediately drove off.

Yondaime's preparation was more cautious than usual. Once we approached the boutique he ran, he had everyone switch over to another car he had prepared beforehand in the basement parking lots. After lots of this troublesome process, we arrived at a certain building that was a little away from the office area in Shinjuku.

We entered the basement parking lots, and Xiao Ling-san immediately came out to greet us. It was a holiday, but she was still dressed in a tidy business suit. There were two people behind her. I couldn't see the faces clearly under the dazzling sunlight, but I could barely make out a man and a woman.

Min-san was the first to get off the passenger seats, and I followed suit.

“Thank you for coming all the way here, Ming Li. Xiang Yu said that she wanted to meet you no matter what, so...”

Min-san shoved aside Xaio Ling-san who approached her, and went right at the duo, grabbing the baseball cap on her head.

I once saw the duo on the photos. The woman was wearing a cheap half-coat and faded jeans, and didn't have the princess-like presence seen on the photo, but I could tell that it was her.

“...You're Xiang Yu.”

Min-san's voice and face showed utter impatience.

“Yes, I'm really sorry that we're meeting in such a situation.”

The woman who started this entire chain of events lowered her head, answering this.

The man beside her held her by the shoulders. This unimpresssible looking man had eyebags filled with fatigue, and looked as though he wanted to say something to Min-san, only to hold back as he bit his lips.

This guy was Umeda Kouji, right?

Once he saw Yondaime in the driver seat, he immediately left Xiang Yu and went over to bow deeply towards the latter.

“Sorry to cause you trouble, Hinamura-san.”

“It's fine. I just brought them along.”

I heard their convestation. So the friend taking care of Umeda Kouji (probably another yakuza) was a friend of Yondaime in Kansai.

“I told you not to mention the past, right?” Yondaime told me. “Don't ask me anything.”

I gulped, and nodded before turning back to Min-san. The latter continued to stare at Huang Xiang Yu with wide eyes, the expression on her face not of utter fury or reproach, but more like despair or of one who gave up.

Huang Xiang Yu looked at Xiao Ling-san, and then at Min-san, timidly asking,

“Erm, what happened about that, between Hong Lei and me?”

Min-san let out a long sigh, and shrugged.

“Nothing much. It's still not confirmed, but this isn't something you should worry about.”

“But, but! Masaru-san—!”

It appeared Xiang Yu wanted to continue saying something, but Xiao Ling-san grabbed her shoulders firmly, showing an unbelievably vicious expression as she shook her head. Xiang Yu remained teary as she muttered,

“I think I should just return to the Huangs once, and explain everything to grandfather and everyone else to avoid causing you trouble, Ming Li.”

Xiang Yu's voice stopped as her throat let out a whimper, for Min-san grabbed her by the collar.

“Hey, you got to be kidding!”

Min-san brought herself close to Xiang Yu as she glared, saying with an axe-like voice. Even Xiao Ling-san, who wanted to step forward and stop Min-san, was terrified by the beast-like face, and stood rooted there.

“You're dead! You're killed by my dad! I know that my dad's always been thinking about you, and he did everything for you sake! Now you're saying that you're going to show up and ruin all his hard work? Enough with that nonse! If you really feel sorry for me, play your role as a dead person! And then forget all

the Huangs and live a new life!

Min-san vented, and shoved Xiang Yu over to Umeda Kouji. She picked up the baseball cap on the floor, put it on, and went back to the car. Xiang Yu continued to whimper in Umeda Kouji's clutches, *thank you*, muttering over and over again.

When I recalled this incident a long time later, I realized that Min-san might have realized the truth at that moment. She's a smart ont, but so smart that it was sad.

Back then, I didn't realize this.

Until the very end.

On the car ride back, Min-san showed what could be described as a look of despair, and she merely stuck her cheeks by the windowside. I was seated beside her, staring at my own knees, not knowing what I should think.

The nexst day, Hiro finally returned to 'Hanamaru'. Min-san and I were preparing the ingredients in the kitchen, and the back door sudden opened, followed by a familiar, carefree grinning face.

“Sorry to make everyone worry.”

Hiro said as he entered the kitchen. He was wwearing a host-styled white suit, and the swelling was finally gone from his face. I really couldn't tell that he was just beaten up a few days back, lying limp on the floorr like a puppet with strings snapped.

“Nobody's worried about you at all. You disappeared just like that. You hid in a woman's house, didn't you?”

Min-san stopped her hand from twirling the soup as she lifted her head up to look at Hiro, saying this unhappily.

“And what's with that gaudy get-up? Since you're all recovered, hurry up and head to the kitchen. Having Narumi help worries me too much.”

“Ah, right, before I work.”

Hiro entered the kitchen, took out a folded piece of paper from his pocket, and handed it over to Min-san. The latter opened it, and immediately frowned.

“What's this?”

“The valuation slip of that BMW. I went to a few second-hand car dealers, but the prices on an online auction were better. Also, I auctioned all those watches, but the money earned isn't much...I have around 5 million Yen in savings...”

“Why mention this to me?”

“It's the money owed by this shop...16 million yen, right? If you pay the money, you won't have to let the mafia do anything to you.”

Min-san tore the valuation slip into the trash bin, and right when Hiro wanted to say something, she rewarded him with a slap. I cringed back in shock, and Hiro too lifted his face in shock.

“Did anybody ask you to do that? Or do you really want me to owe you a favor?”

“...That's not it. Once I get married to you, the debt owed by 'Hanamaru' will basically be mine. It's to be expected that I'll pay it off with my own money, right?”

This time, there was none of the sweet talk in Hiro's words. Thus, Min-san looked at her raised palm, and again looked at Hiro's eyes, asking impatiently,

“Are you serious when you say you want to get married with me?”

“Right, very serious.”

Hiro nodded. At this moment, the smile on his face, not the honey wine-like smile that caused the hearts of the triple digit number of women to flutter, but that of a teary youth who experienced something new and harsh.

That was why he did it, right? Min-san averted her eyes with some awkwardness.

“Alright, I'll beat you up at least. Hurry up, change up and get in.”

I handed the apron over to Hiro. Right when he stepped into the corridor, Min-

san muttered,

“It's not an issue of money.”

Min-san lowered her head at the wok sadly, while Hiro and I stared at her sidelong face at the same time.

“You guys dealt with the yakuza many times alreayd, and you guys should know, right? The Huang Coaliation found my weakness. Actually, they don't care about the initial reason. They'll just attack the weakness for their own objectives. That's how the yakuza play. Repaying the debt won't solve anything. If we're not careful, they'll set another trap to trip us again.”

That was why Min-san made a request to the NEET dectrive, and I accepted it.

Hiro and I exchanged a glance, and we silently went out from the back door. I sat at the emergency staircase, my cheeks on my knees.

Min-san became weak.

But it was not because the yakuza got a hold on her weakness, but because the incident caused by her own dadd caused her own life much turmoil, and she was mentally worn out. I could tell from her face. That person, who I knew was stronger than anyone else, was actually...

She might tell him off harshly, but Min-san probably left a large space for her disappeared dad in her heart, I guess? That space would give off a cold, empty feeling from time to time. I knew that feeling very well.

What could I do exactly?

What could I do for the woman who was so important to me—for us?

Think. Think. Think of something.

As Min-san said, there was a 'trap ' laid out. Right when I was leaning by the railing of the emergency staircase, Min-san's anxious voice could be heard from the back door.

“...What's going on? ...How can you do this without a reason? ...No, no, this isn't an issue of repayment. We worked so logn together, so at least explain this

to me! Please wai! I'll go over now!”

Following that was the phone receive being slammed. What? Did something happen? I nudged the back door slightly, and saw Min-san hurriedly put on a shirt, about to duck out of the counter and leave the shop.

“Hiro, I'll leave the preparations to you. I'll be right back!”

“Ah, yes.”

Min-san's footsteps could be heard leaving, and I asked Hiro.

“What happened? Did something...”

“Ah, yeah. The noodles weren't delivered, so Min-san called the noodle manufacturer Okda, but it seems that they don't want to do business with us anymore...”

“Ehh?”

Don't do business?

The noodle manufacturer Okada had been working with 'Hanamaru' ever since the shop opened. Why did this happen?

And right when Min-san personally went to the manufacturer to negotiate, the situation got dire. The food suppliers called one after another, causing Hiro much distress.

“Please listen, our owner isn't around right now! It's difficult for us to accept such a sudden request. Do you mind explaining the reason to us?”

I heard Hiro continue to question them on the phone, thinking that I should at least do what I could do, and I went ahead to prepare the ingredients.

However, it was all a waste of them. Min-san returned from Okada noodle manufacturing, and once she heard Hiro's explanation, she remained by the phone, negotiating with the suppliers.

The sun set, and all the members of the NEET detective agency were gathered at 'Hanamaru', a rarity.

“I never thought that they'll pull this method. I thought they would be more

direct...” Tetsu-senpai folded his arms, showing a grim look.

“Thinking about it, this is the most direct method...”

Major took off his military cap, and scratched his head.”

“The problem now is that we have no proof that it was them who did it...every supplier remained vague and refused to explain. But there's no doubt about it.”

Hiro looked extremely frail.

All the suppliers to 'Hanamaru' requested not to provide the ingriends. Some of them angrily indicated, This will cause us distress, so stop calling us again. Some suppliers begged, We didn't hope for this to happen, so please understand. However, when the reason was asked, all of them remained silent.

We looked at the kitchen through the opened bac door. Min-san was twirling fried rice in the Chinese work, nonchalantly chatting with the customers.

But for the time being, the shop wouldn't be able to open tomorrow.

It might not even be temporary...the shop might never be opened again.

Hiro cleaned up after our finished bowls, and Tetsu-senpai suddenly brought his forehead over to me, saying,

“Looks like we can only attack head on!”

“To where?” Major asked. “To the mafia's base? Negotiate with them?”

“That's all we can do now, right? I don't know if the Chinese mafia has a tradition for one on one batttles..”

“But I heard that Huang Hong Lei went barefisted and beat that Yondaime with speed.”

“You idiot bastard. Do you think I'll be weaker than Yondaime? I'll definitely beat that bastard of a slick hair and show you.”

Right when the duo bickered, a long figure appeared in the alley. Speak of the devil, it was Yondaime, followed by Pole and Rocky.

“Are you going to fight, Tetsu-ojisa?”

“Time to take action! We're not going to lose to some Chinese mafia! We'll

send them packing back to Hong Kong?”

“Speaking of which, where's Hong Kong?”

“In the North, I guess? Isn't there a nursery rhyme that the snow continues to rain, and so is the ice?” [7]

“Hong Kong's a lot more south than Okinawa...”

“What's the matter, Vice-Admiral Fujishima? Your retorts are slower and weaker than usual.”

“No, I'm not it the mood...”

I knew I shouldn't have said anything. Yondaime beat up Pole and Rocky, getting them t shut. He sat down beside me, and I couldn't help but ask,

“Since you came all the way over, did you think of a good plan?”

“Are you an idiot? That's your job.” Yondaime spat back. “I came by since I thought that since I might never get to eat the ramen again.”

For some reason, Yondaime's response was the most reassuring to me. Just a bit more comforting though.

Starting from the next day, I went home immediately after school. There was a logjam of people preparing for the culture festival, and even though it was late, many classrooms remained lit. The corridors and the back of the stairwells were littered with cardboard and decorations used for the outside, the arts-type clubs took turns rehearsing in the school, the committee members with armbands were patrolling the school, and the entire school was filled with a vibrant atmosphere. However, I was so busy with my part-time work the entire month that I didn’t participate in the set up of class 2-4’s tent, so there was no need for me in the classroom. Furthermore, if I remained in school, I would be questioned by my classmates, “Fujishima, why is ‘Hanamaru’ closing down?” “Is it our fault?” “Is Min-san feeling alright? Did we tire her too much?” but I couldn’t explain matters to her, and it as really tough on me. That was why I immediately went home after classes ended.

Also, I couldn’t bring myself to show up at the detective agency. For some reason, I knew I’ll see a notice the words ‘we’re temporarily closed’ pasted on

the shutters of ‘Hanamaru’. Seeing that would certainly depress me. That also didn’t take into consideration that as a member of the detective agency, I proudly accepted the case, but I couldn’t think of any solutions, and I couldn’t bring myself to see Alice’s face.

I cupped my knees as I laid on my bed, pretending not to notice the winter that was slowly closing in as I draped the blanket over my shoulders as I tried to figure out everything that had happened in this messy situation.

And so, the sun set, the days passed by, and October was about to end.

I heard on the phone that Hiro had been going around looking for new food suppliers, but at this point, ‘Hanamaru’ used rare ingredients for its ramen soup, and so the search wasn’t going on.

“But what’s more serious now is.” Hiro said, *“Min-san hasn’t been able to cheer up recently.”*

If it had been the usual Min-san, she probably would have charged up to Hong Lei, beat him up good, and warn him not to do anything to the suppliers. At this point however, it’s good to have a little break, she merely smiled and said that.

I hung up the phone, and laid on the bed.

That person had always been supporting us, and we never expected a day when she would show weakness and ask us for help.

That person was our sun, and it was at this point that I realized this fact emphatically. Once she hid in her cave, we could only remain in the dark day, unable to adapt, moving around without a cause, not knowing our rhythm or hearing any music.

I buried my face into the pillow, crushing away at these useless thoughts.

On the last day of October, I remained groveled in my room, letting time pass by meaninglessly, only to hear a hard knock on the door. I got up from my pillow, and stopped playing the music from the computer.

“Narumi? Have you woken up? You got guests!”

It was my older sister’s voice. Maybe she realized that the music had stopped

playing, since she opened the door and stepped in.

“I think that guy came before, that dropout called Kuwabara. He’s really wearing some tacky clothes.

“Hiro?”

I went down to the first level, and opened the door at the corridor. Once I saw Hiro standing there, I was left speechless.

He was wearing a cocktail suit and a silk hat, holding a short staff with a golden ball, and said something like ‘bonsoir’ while dressed like that, which caused me to instinctively retreat and close the door.

“W-wait a sec! Sorry for shocking you, but I’ll explain! Wear this, Narumi!”

Hiro slipped through a hat and some folded clothes through the gap at the door.

“…Well, no need for that. I don’t know whose Princess’ party are we going to, but you can ask someone else…”

“No no. It’s Halloween today, you know?”

Halloween.

October 31st.

I see, it’s Halloween. My slow consciousness was able to digest this fact. And then what? Why di I have to celebrate this pumpkin festival? The clothes handed to me were too heavy, and my doubts were gradually sinking in fatigue and helplessness.

“Change up and come out. I’ll be waiting.”

A few minutes later, I was wearing a frock coat and a round bowler hat, and this made me look like a proper English gentleman as I exited the house. There was a deep blue foreign car parked outside, and Hiro, dressed up in an idiotic manner, opened the back seat of the door. I looked inside, and was immediately left speechless.

“…Hiro’s the one who chose it!”

Alice was seated there, looking really displeased as she wore an inverseness

coat and a wide cape, a deer fur hunting cap, and holding a thick, short cigar in hand. The bear plushie pressed on her tummy looked more outstanding than usual.

“Ahhh…”

I could only feel that my consciousness was about to drift to the land of the elves, and to drag myself back into reality, I turned my eyes to Hiro to be sure.

“Alice is dressed up as Sherlock Holmes, so this plain attire of mine is Watson, right?”

“Correct! Detective and assistant. I thought of other clothing to fit the Halloween theme, but Alice’s so cute wearing this that it’s not fun at all!

Speaking of which, I guess the reason why Hiro bought a whole bunch of clothing for Alice was for her to wear it this Halloween? Explains all the Tokyu Hands bags.

“So, I thought of having a detective dress up as a detective. I think that’s an innovative idea.”

“What’s innovative about this?” Alice muttered. “What’s with this crude getup? This is a humiliation to Conan Doyle. Who wears a hunting cap in town? More like Jeremy Brandt.”

“But if you don’t dress up like that, nobody’s going to tell that you’re Holmes. It’s a festival, and the most important thing is to identify easily.”

Holmes chuckled as he slipped back the driver seat, and I sat down beside Alice.

“And then? Why are you dressed up as Arsene Lupin?” It’s like there’s some relationship between him and Holmes, and not at all. Really interesting.

“Nothing much. Just for easy identification too. If I’m to dress up as Professor Moriarty, nobody can tell, right?”

Right…I was starting to feel that nothing really mattered at this point.

The car drove off, and Alice remained furious and silent. It seemed she really didn’t like her dress-up, so I tried saying this to her,

“Actually…you kinda look cute.”

“Wh-wh-wh-why are you saying this out of a sudden? How can I be thinking about that kind of that!”

And so Alice lowered the hunting cap further, covering her entire face.

That night, the devastation at ‘Hanamaru’ was akin to a witches’ party celebrating the return of demons to the mortal realm. The entire shop was lit, and at the place where the curtains used to be, there were a few pumpkin lanterns hanging there, while girls wearing maid outfits and bunny ears were giggling and having fun. I really wanted to hide in the car along with Alice until daylight, but alas, it was a pity that Hiro, who first got out from the car, immediately yelled out, “I brought them here!”

The real identities of the bunnies were the girls from our class. Ayaka came hopping to us happily, and I couldn’t help but feel a migraine.”

“Fujishima-kun! …Erm.” Ayaka said, only for her smile to be frozen on her face, and she looked aside, not wanting to see my gentleman garb. “Your hat’s as cute as a steamed chocolate hat.”

Couldn’t you just say that it didn’t suit me? I looked at my classrooms, and said,

“Why is everyone dressed up as bunnies?”

“Eh? I didn’t tell you? That’s the waitress attire for the culture festival.”

I didn’t know…even though the culture festival was coming up in 3 days.

“You don’t have any awareness as a member of the class.” The girls in my class noted.

“You’ve been going home recently.”

“But you had nothing to do if you stayed behind, and you’ll get in everyone’s way.”

The vicious bunnies surrounded me, at for a moment, I was on tentahooks. I slipped to the back alley, and found Major dressed up as Nazi soilder, which Tetsu-senpai was dressed as the Incredible Hulk (more or less, since his outfit didn't look any different from usual, just that his skin got colored green), licking away at ice cream.

“What's with that get up of yours? A mook in a Ghibli film?” Tetsu-senpai asked.

“It's Watson!” As expected, nobody could recognize this outfit if I didn't explain.

“My get up's the most unique today.”

Major gleefully noted. Diminutive he might be, he had a uniform cap with a crossbone marking on it that really seemed off.

“Such a shallow get up will normally be laughed off by me, but it does fit in the atmosphere for this festival.”

But in Halloween, we have to dress up as ghosts or demons, right? If we're dressed up like this, it'll just be an ordinary clothing party! I looked aroundd at the buzzing crowd that's enjoying themselves, and inadvertently felt really relieved that Yondaime wasn't here.

“If we invitied Yondaime here, there'll definitely be 20 or so guys who don't

need to dress up just to look like King Kong or Chewbaccas, so I didn't tell him about this.” Tetsu-senpai noted proudly. Smart move.

I looked at the back door through, and Min-san was dressed up like her usual self, the tank top, a black apron around her waist as she continued cooking. I heaved a little sigh of relief. This person was still most suited to work in the kitchen.

However, I was a little sad that the food she was preparing wasn't ramen.

“You're not dressed up, Min-san?”

“Of course not. What a stupid question. How am I supposed to work in a kitchen wearing such crazy things?”

Min-san retorted as she continued stirring the contents of the pot. Hiro stood beside her, and said,

“I'm Lupin, and Min-san's dressed as Mine Fujiko.”

“It's just the hair let down!”

“Look, big breasts too!”

“My chest's always like this, you idiot.” Min-san sent Hiro flying with a kick.

And so, Tetsu-senpai suddenly grabbed me by the collar.

“Hey Narumi, go get Alice here, alright? We're really excited to see her!”

“Narumi, it's Watson's job to escort Holmes, you know?” And now even Lupin's saying that while standing at the back door. I had a look at the parking lot, and it appeared the hunting hat was still in the car. I could only sigh, and stand up.

I brought Alice over, and the bunnies were strangle agitated. Alice was hugged and fondled by the girls, appearing to be on the verge of tears.

“So cute! Who's this who's this?” “Let's take a photo together!”

“Let go of me! I'm not a doll!”

“I know! You're cosplaying as Conan!” “Detective Conan, right? It's exactly the same!”

That's not it. It's the original Conan. Young people nowadays...

“Narumi, aren't you the same age as them?” Tetsu-senpai pointed out, and that really devastated me. Now that he mentioned it, it's true, but I really, really forgot about it.

“Oh yeah, how old are you already, Narumi? 17? Right...you're in high school!”

Hiro said this, and the atmosphere quiet down for some reason. My classmates, with Ayaka leading them, Alice surrounded by my classmates, and even Min-san, standing at the kitchen counter, was looking at me.

“...Eh...ah?”

“It's your birthday today, right?”

Birthday. October 31st. It's definitely my 17th birthday today.

“You see, Fujishima forgot about it after all.”

“You were right, Ayaka!”

“Don't tell me you forgot which month is it tomorrow?”

The bunnies' mutters entered my ears. Despite this, I couldn't relate myself to today's date being both Halloween and my birthday, merely twirling around in my mind.

At this moment, Ayaka dragged Alice along and opened the back door.

“You ready, Alice? 1, 2, 3—”

The crackers in their hands exploded, and the ribbons landed on my face.

“Happy birthday, Fujishima!”

And once Ayaka said that, my classmates pulled the crackers in their hands, and I was immediately covered with thin ribbons.

And as the explosive smoke lingered, I sat on an old tire, stunned, not knowing how to react, and suddenly, Min-san served a tray of large orange blobs.

“20 servings of pumpkin ice cream coming right now!”

The girls cheered.

That night was the first time I saw Min-san being completely wasted.

All my classmates had already left, while Tetsu-senpai and Major were holding empty bottles of rum, sleeping on the emergency stairs. A little brandy was used in the ice cream, but it's now empty, so I guess Min-san drank it all. Completely red faced, she was cuddling Alice firmly, rubbing her face on the latter's cheek as she muttered some words.

“Narumi, hurry up and drag her away from me! She reeks of alcohol! It stinks!”

Alice stumbled and fell on the corridor, appearing to be on the verge of tears. She was fondled by the girls in our class, and was embraced firmly by a completely drunk Min-san. The cape on her Inbalance coat was completely crumpled, and the hunting cap fell who knew where, and even her long, black hair was ruffled into a mess. It was no wonder then she was about to cry. However, both Hiro and me alone weren't able to pull Min-san out, and whenever we touched her shoulders or arms, we would be kicked away.

“Stop messing around, you bastards! Don't touch me!”

“Are you treating me as a bolster or something?”

“How can you be one when you're so skinny? I should have fed you more.”

We had no choice. We could only drag Alice and Min-san together to the bedroom and put her on the futon.

“I'll get some water.” Hiro went to the kitchen.

“What's wrong, Master? Are you fine letting us see how unrestrained you can be?”

Alice fiddled with Min-san's hair that was let down, asking with a gentle voice of disbelief.

“Nnn.”

Min-san rubbed her cheek on Alice's thigh. To be honest, I never saw Min-san being so relaxed.

“I just had a little thought.”

“Of course.”

“That I might as well stop running the ramen shop, and that I should just, make ice cream or something. I accepted the ramen shop begrudgingly, so now, I can change it to the ice cream shop I wanted to open...right?”

Alice and I exchanged looks, and we never said anything. Hiro just so happened to return to the room, holding a cup as he stood at the door.

“...Narumi.”

“Yes?”

“The photo album...on the table there...”

Min-san remained sprawled on Alice's legs, weakly raising her hand as she pointed at the table.

We saw a photo under the faulty, flickering light, and there appeared to be a mother and a daughter in the photo, beaming away. The teenage girl was obviously Min-san, but surprising to me was the mother. When did I have an impression of her?

“This is...?”

“My mom. Really resembles that woman, right?”

I nodded. Alice and Hiro looked at me, the expressions on their faces clearly asking, Like who?

That was the woman I only met once. The one who triggered this entire sequence of events and was most likely on the way to Kansai to live a new life, Huang Xiang Yu.

Again, I stared at the little Min-san bending down in the photo, and the smiling Huang Wen Li. She was exactly the same in appearance to Xiang Yu, Thinking about it, she was the aunt to Xiang Yu, so it wasn't strange for them to look so alike.

“That's his reason. That damned dad of mine was willing to cause me so much trouble because of this reason, all for the sake of letting the woman he was protecting leave the Huangs!”

I didn't know what I should say.

Did he leave his own daughter and the shop he left behind be in jeopardy just because the woman he was protecting resembled his deceased wife? Because he recalled his younger self? Was that simply all? A strange feeling arose deep within my throat.

“Thinking about this...I really am stupid. There's no reason for me...to clin onto this ramen shop.”

Hiro crouched by Min-san's pillow. Min-san turned around, met Hiro in the eyes, and smiled, saying,

“It's just a passing thought! Don't give me that look. I'm not serious here. I'll think of something, either to make Hong Lei kneel in front of me, or that I'm going to cry to grandpa who I never met over the last 10 years or so...”

Min-san reached her hand out, patting Hiro's face lightly.

That hand lost all strength, and fell.

We left the sleeping Min-san to Hiro, and I decided to escort Alice back to the detective agency. The emergency staircase was completely pitch dark, and after climbing halfway through, the detecitve wearing the imbalanced coat muttered,

“Narumi...”

“Hm?”

“I understand now.”

“...I see.”

I didn't ask her what exactly it was. Having passed my 17th birthday meant that I knew Alice for an entire year. I was used to doing many things, and used to the work of a detective assistant.

Rather than ask stupid questions, it was more important for me to stand beside the detective and shield her from the chilly night breeeze.

“I know where Hanada Masaru is now, and what he intends to me. I know it all.”

Alice's voice was as usual, no, a little more delicate this time, appearing to

break down at any given moment.

“But this truth, is meaningless to Min-san, just like the tens of thousands of cases handled in the past. Don't be surprised, just listen to me. Actually, I don't want to lose 'Hanamaru' either.”

“I'm not surprised. What are you saying?”

I patted Alice's trembling shoulders. It had been 4 seasons since she met me, and she probably changed somewhat, right? When she again ascended the stairs slowly, I could see her faltering from behind.

When we arrived at the door to the agency, Alice turned back, her hands pressed on the torso of my flock coat.

“Watson.”

“...Eh? Ah, me?”

“John H Watson is a doctor, and an author. You should know that, right?”

“I know.”

And on the other hand, Sherlock Holmes is a detective. Nothing but a detective.”

What's she trying to say? Were those words really appropriate?”

“In his life, Holmes only wrote two novels, but he always lamneted, “I miss my Watson'. It's boring without Watson around, no surprise without Watson always asking questions, and unable to convert the thoughts perfectly into words.”

I sighed. Alice moved her hands away from me, and leaned on the door to the detective agency.

“A detective can only face the world as a reader, only able to accept the complexity of this world, and read it as fact, analyze, digest and accept it. But...”

Alice lifted her head.

“But an author's different. I once read a bulletin written by an author on how to write a manuscript, and what he wrote was, a novel can be written in reverse from the last scene—or to be precise, this is the right way to write a story. Do you understand? *An author can deduce the world*.”

Deduce the world, the author could piece togther all the paths leading to the ending for the sake of his expected ending, and connect it to reality.

Alice uttered each word forcefully,

“I can't do it. Only you can.”

Those words reached my heart after a very long time. Alice quietly waited for it to enter my heart, and opened the door before letting her petite frame slip through the gap, whispering to me in the end,

“Good night, my Watson.”

My elbows were leaning on the railing of the stairwell, staring blankly at the night scene between the buildings, pondering over what Alice and Min-san said. The chilly breeze of the night caused the tips of my nose and ears to become chilly.

Deduce.

Not to make complicated matters simple, but the opposite.

From the simplistic final scene, I should direct what we should do.

Of course, what we wanted to protect are Min-san and 'Hanamaru'. In other words, the continue with that boring, steady yet warm life, the usual life of boiling chicken bones, dicing onions, cooking noodles, marinating roasted pork, frying vegetables.

And the ones posing a threat to our daily life is the Hong Kong Mafia, the Huang Coalition, the yazkua. How it all started didn't matter anymore, and in any case, Huang Hong Lei intended to have Min-san to himself.

The chilly winds blew upon my head, and I had a strange feeling of my brain cells almost becoming crystalline.

Right, this matter itself was all because the yakuza wanted trouble with Min-san. There was no need to solve any mystery, and also no risk of misidentifying the enemy. The enemy was crushing us with brute force and economic power, so we just had to shut them up, and make them unable to speak up with a power that surpasses them. This was the only method.

A power to surpass the Huang Coalition?

Starting from the Hirasaka-gumi, I started listing out all the gangs I could think of. It's not a good thing, but I did know of a few delinquent gans. However, these powers alone probably won't be enough, since we're dealing with the Hong Kong mafia here. Then...do we call the police? If we explained thoroughly that the gunshot incident that night was—no, this won't do. News of Huang Xiang Yu and Umeda Kouji being alive would be revealed. Didn't Min-san say that to Xiang Yu? Forget everything about the Huangs, and live a life anew? Even if Min-san did say that in the spur of the moment, I couldn't just trample on her feelings. Also, that wouldn't guarantee that 'Hanamaru' would remain fine in the future. Maybe they might look for trouble through other excuses?

If we could throw out something that was purely stronger and make Huang Hong Lei give up. But where exactly could we find this strength? The power that could overwhelm the king of Kabukicho was—

“...Ah!”

Suddenly, I thought of something. Right. There was something within my reach. But...would that really work?

I quickly descended the emergency staircase, jumped over Tetsu-senpai who was lying on the floor, and Hiro, dressed in a cocktail suit, walked out from the back door of the kitchen.

“Min-san's asleep now. She doesn't look uncomfortable in any sense, so don't worry.”

“E-erm, Hiro.”

Seeing how anxious I was, Hiro tilted his head in confusion.

“I want to ask you something, or rather, affirm this with you. I want you to do something, but if things don't go well, it may be bad for you. You might not be able to follow Min-san—”

“Narumi, calm down.”

Lupin's hands were on Watson's shoulders. He removed his monocle and silk hat, his face showing an honest smile befitting of his usual self as a gigolo.

“...You thought of something?”

I nodded frantically. There were only 3 days left, not enough time at all. With a searing tone, I explained to Hiro, and the cheerfyul smile gradually became a wry smile of grimace.

After finishing my explanation, I finally heaved a sigh, and I lifted my eyes to observe Hiro's face. The dark shadows under the dim road lights meant that I couldn't see his face clearly. I inadvertently felt a distinc chill climbing from my arms to the pit, and anxiety rose into my heart. I exerted myself and explained the entire time, but I didn't know if his could work. I didn't know how many people I could mobilize for this, and I didn't know whether it was a power that had enough stopping power.

However, the worry on Hiro's face vanished in front of me, and appearing next was a smile I never saw before.

As expected—this guy could still smile in such a moment.

“I understand.”

Hiro took the silk hat and placed it on his head, the inexplicable smile hidden under the shadow.

“I'll try. Nobody else other than me can do this.”

The figure in the cocktail suit vanished into the night, and I felt two presences getting behind restlessly behind me.

“And I thought you finally had some motivation, Narumi.”

“You want us to do clean up work?”

I turned back to look, and found the little Nazi and the Incredible Hulk leaning by the stair railing, gulping down the rum in their bottles. I couldn't help but give a wry smile.

“You heard it all?”

“We did. Really to be expected of you, Narumi, it's not a healthy one...”

“Can't accept the fact that Hiro just needs to stand by the sidelines and get all the goodies.

“What's bad about it? He's the one talking all the bad too.”

“That's true. “I nodded. “The protagonists in the story are Hiro and Min-san...”

But I was wrong. It was only much later on that I realized this.

The protagonist of this story had been Hanada Masaru all this while.

To make it to the appointment, Min-san was dressed up in the purple dress, tied her hair into an elegant knot, and appeared like a Hong Kong movie star.

“...What? Why are you spacing out? Is anything weird about my outfit?”

Min-san lowered her head awkwardly as she looked at her clothing, and glared at me. I flusteredly shook my head.

November 3rd, the day the culture festival of M high school was to be held, and also the day Huang Hong Lei was to hold the wedding ceremony, and I dropped by at 'Hanamaru' early in the plan.

Based on the plan I came up with, the first step was to have Min-san attend the ceremony as usual. Soon after, Huang Hong lei would be there to get her.

“That Hong Lei had the dress tailored so nicely. I'm never going to wear this again.”

“Eh? That's a pity though.”

“What pity, you idiot?'

I got flicked hard in the forehead. Strictly put, Min-san's dress up was really a stark unbefitting constrast to the ramen shop.

“Anyway, ixn't it your school culture festival today? Is it really alright for you to be here?”

“Erm...yeah, I guess.”

I had Ayaka tell my classmates that Min-san was in a little difficulty. Thus, everyone had a common understanding and indicated in unison, “Then let's have you focus on Min-san's stuff, Fujishima.”

“You really got left out by the class.”

“I wasn't! A-anyway, didn't they celebrate my birthday with me!?”

At this moment, the phone in my uniform pocket vibrated.

“Fujishima-kun?” It was Ayaka's voice.

“How's the situation over there?”

“Business is great! We prepared a lot, but we probably will be sold out in the afternoon...”

“Sorry for being unable to help...”

“Don't worry! It's fine even without you around. Nobody's really bothered by it!”

Ayaka...you don't really mean anything with those words, right?

“But we got ourselves a little problem here...what time can Min-san make it?”

“Eh? Erm...around 3pm or so?”

Did something happen? Didn't they say that the teachers would come by to inspect after the activities were done? The food hygiene specialist just needed to be there for a little while, right? (even though in theory, she should be there the entire time)

“The principal and the education committee inspectors heard of the rumors and wanted to visit our shop, saying that they want to meet Min-san personally! What do we do? I lied to them saying that we don't have enough ingredients, so Min-san went out to buy, and they said they'll be back in the afternoon...”

“Well...” Now this is troublesome. I had a look at the clock, and it was almost 11. “I'll think of something.”

I hung up the phone, and informed Min-san, who merely shrugged.

“I should have left earlier anyway, so it's fine for us to go early, right? Speaking of which...”

Min-san grabbed my collar.

“What are you planning? You aren't saying anything even at this point?”

“Eh? Ehh, no, that's...”

I wanted to avert my eyes, but my face was being clamped such that I had to look right at Min-san. Such a terrifying expression...

“Hiro never contacted me ever since that day, while Tetsu and Major pretended not to know anything. You're not going to say anything?”

“Well, that's because, we're trying our best to solve this without worrying you, and we aren't sure whether it will work...Anyway, we'll send someone to the scene first, so just go along with his instructions.”

“Didn't you ask Sou for help? Are you intending to charge into the place?”

She's really sharp. Guess it's hard to hide everything from her.

“It's fine. We won't be that reckless.”

Thinking about it from another perspective, our plan might be more reckless. To be honest, I really hoped for everything to be settled down. If possible, I really hoped to tell Hong lei before the ceremony and settle this peacefully. Too bad I only thought of this plan 3 days ago, and didn't have enough time to plan, so I had to take action first.

Furthermore, even if the plan goes well, the outcome was meaningless.

Min-san glared at me fiercer than ever, and nearly lifted me by the collar. At this moment, a heavy exhaust sound on the other side of the ramen shop shutters echoed, and Min-san clicked her tongue, shoving me into the back door of the corridor.

“Not a good thing to have Hong Lei see you now, right? Get out by the back door.”

I pushed the bicycle between the buildings, and when I got out to the road, I glanced back. There was a black foreign sedan parked outside 'Hanamaru', and the chauffeur dressed in a black suit and white gloves opened the door. I didn't know whether it was a coincidence, but Huang Hong Lei got out from the back seat, dressed in a flock coat, much grander than I did when I wore it on Halloween, and I felt so sheepish I wanted to die. Seeing him standing alonside Min-san in the purple dress, it really resembled a scene in a movie.

I turned my bicycle handle around, and pedalled hard. The gloomy skies appeared to snow, and as I sped up, the cold seeped into my body.

The Zodica Group manages an Esthétique and a sports gym, and it owned a very tall building in Ebisu. The wedding would be held at the hall at the highest level of this building.

I parked my bicycle by the roadside, and discreetly observed the entrance, only to felt such great despair I was giddy. A few savage looking men dressed in black suits were clearly standing at obvious places, two of them guarding the atrium, while another two were standing guard at the reception and the elevator respectively. It felt as though they would draw their Qinglong blades at any given moment and pull of some stunt, and seemed that they had no intention of keeping a low profile as it was their own tuff. Ordinary civilians were so terrified, they avoided the elevators and took the stairs. It's bad, could we achieve our objective?

I took out the transmitter microphone, put on the earphones, and called for major.

“Everything at hand is ready. We're ready to take action.”

“There are 4 mafia guys at the entrance. Switch to the stairs.”

Tetsu-senpai's voice interrupted.

“We got people watching the stairs too! I'm hiding in the toilet now. Every corner at the corridors of the roof is guarded. I just saw Master and Hong Lei enter.”

“Eh...this is...” really troubling. How many men did he arrange for? Added security was to be expected to protect the guests attending the ceremony, but the savage glances at the lobby entrance were obviously not guards. It appeared that Hong lei understood that we wouldn't go down easily.

“Take the emergency staircase.”

“Got it.”

And then, Yondaime's voice too could be heard,

“Looks like there's a lot of Chinese outside watching the vehicles parked. We can only drive around before we take action.”

“I'll leave it to you. Min-san will escape from the back of the building where the emergency staircase is.”

“Anyway.” Tetsu-senpai interrupted, *“Why did you tell Master to join the party? Couldn't you have ignored them and get her to attend the school festival?”*

“We aren't just dealing with the Huang Coalition here. We got a lot of topshot Chinese who were invited. If Hong Lei's going to get embarrassed in such a moment, this won't be a problem he alone can settle. If the Huang Coalition continue to cause trouble, the situation will get tougher for us.”

“Mm...”

That's why we couldn't embarrass the Huangs during the lunch gathering. However, the gathering later would be between relatives, and there was no need to play nice. Of course, he wouldn't let her leave that easily either.

That's why we'll just have to kidnap the bride.

“...Hong Lei's speech is beginning.”

Major muttered. I folded the map back into my pocket, and stood up.

At exactly 1pm, Yi Ling-san called. I was at the Starbucks opposite the building, and immediately got up from my seat.

“We're in the restroom. Min-san said she isn't feeling well, and slipped out with me.”

My heart was starting to kick at the inside of my ribs. Yi Ling-san's our first trump. We had her on standby deep in the enemy camp by registering and be a receptionist for the ceremony.

“Once the power goes out, run to the emergency staircase, about two minutes later!”

I exited the shop, went across a road, and ran to the back of the building. I

switched on the wireless microphone, and spoke to Pole.

“Target's at the emergency staircase. I'm betting that there should be mafia guardig the back. Once you see Min-san get down, start causing disturbance.”

“Yes! Allow us to refine our manliness!”

Don't be so loud, you idiots! Right when I went around to the road at the back of the building, I saw a few Hirasaka-gumi members in black T-shirts scurrying towards the Zodiac building like cockroaches.

Next, Yondaime.

“Drive the car over!”

“On it!”

And finally, I communicated with Tetsu-senpai and Major at the same time,

“It*s time. I'll leave it to yu!”*

“Oh!” A baaritone echoed back. Once Min-san and Yi Ling-san escaped, he'll be in charge of guarding the emergency stairs. As for Major—

“Let's begin. We'll meet at Yasukuni.[8]*”*

I looked up at the roof of the building overlooking the gloomy skies. At that moment, I saw all the lights at the roof go out.

A black sedan ran by me while I ran. It was Yondaime. At the back of the Zodiac building was a wide green patch, and visibility was bad. Furthermore, the emergency staircase wasn't outside the building itself, and we couldn't tell if Min-san managed to escape successfully. The intense heartbeat meant that I couldn't hear my own footsteps. Yondaime's car was parked by the fence of the greenery, and I caught up, holding my breath as I watched.

From a corner of my eyes, I saw several black figures, and my impression of the ground was contorted. They were not Hirasaka-gumi members. The black T-shirt guys had already passed through the woods, and was about to assault the back door of the building, while the many strong black figures closed in from the flanks of the buildings, seemingly intending to surround them. Seeing this, Yondaime wanted to open the door immediatley.

“N-no, please stay in the car!”

I shouted as I ran to the greenery, towards the back door. I felt the melting brain juices spurting from my ears. 5-6, no—there were more of them. Why were there so many people? There shouldn't be a lot of people standing guard at the back of the building, right? My mind was filled with skepcism, confused by the growls of Chinese and Japanese.

I went across the green patch, and in front of me was the end of the fence. The emergency staircase to the building was right within my reach. At this moment, a person in cream colored suit barged into my sights, and I nearly fell limp immediatley.

Huang Hong Lei passed through the potted plants, grabbing a Hirasaka-gumi member by the shoulder, and slammed him down with a punch. He turned back, and knocked down another.

Why—why's Hong Lei here? Didn't Major stop the elevator?

Right when I tumbled as sat by the fence, the door to the emergency staircase opened. Yi Ling-san showed up first, her face completely frozen as she stayed rooted. Min-san in her Chinese outfit shoved her aside, and walked out from the back door.

“Hold it!”

She bellowed sharply.

“Don't move, you brats! Do you want to die?”

Some of the black T-shirt guys were trampled onto the brick floor, some were shoved into the potted plants, and some had their arms locked by the mafia, frozen there. At this moment, the number of mafia members was at least ten or so, double that of the number of Hirasaka-gumi members. All of them stopped kicking and punching, staring at Min-san silently.

Huang Hong Lei moved past his subordinates to approach Min-san. I collapsed on the floor, backtracking, calling for Major in the transmitter. There was no response. Why?

Hong Lei suddenly turned towards me.

“Hey! What are you yelling for?”

He said as he glared at me, raising a hand. I saw him holding the intercom with the goggles on, and felt darkness appear in front of my eyes, my organs practically froze. That was Major's communicator. Was he found out in the electrical room? How? Is he safe?

“I thought you wouldn't be so stupid...”

Hong Lei tossed away the goggles in his hands, and narrowed his eyes as he sized me up.

“What's with this commotion? Do you think you can accomplish anything with these brats?”

Min-san too gave me a scathing look, practically saying, isn't this just a reckless scuffle? No, this isn't what you think. I wanted to explain, but I couldn't let out a voice. Min-san appeared to have given up as she looked at the floor, and apologized to Hong Lei. Sorry, I'll go back with you, so let go of these brats! You can't do that! All our efforts will be wasted. But what do we do now? I intended to start a scuffle first before rationalizting everything. Everything still waiting to sprout, and they're going to be trampled before they're discovered. What do I do? Come up with excuses to pull a fast one? But I don't have anything at all. It's impossible. If I try to bluff, I'll be seen through. See. My legs are so weak, I can't even stand up right.

But at this moment, someone spoke up.

“—Young Master.”

Hong Lei looked away from me towards the voice. Min-san was about to return to the emergency staircase, and stopped, while the mafia members holding down the Hirasaka-gumi members too lifted their heads.

Gentle footsteps entered the thick shadows of the trees and the building. Appearing around the corner of the building was a group of middle aged women wearing posh semi-formal dresses with a corsage and scarf.

“My apologies, madams.”

Hong Lei sighed, and tidied his ruffled clothing.

“It is my inappropriate service that you saw such an unruly scene, so i do applogize for that. Ming Li and will return immediately.”

Those middle aged women were here to attend the ceremony, and I could tell from their faces that they were all Chinese. There were 10 of them...maybe more of them? The dangerous charisma emitting from their eyes showed that they were rich, but not ordinary women, and furthermore, there were some faces I seemed to recognize.

Ah, right, I met them at 'Hello Palace'—they were the group of older ladies who went all the way to the entrance of Yi Ling-san's room.

So—they made it?

“No...pleae allow Ming Li-san to return...”

One of the ladies said this. The fins she showed when she smiled resembled a raptor, and I wiped my sweaty palm onto my pants. Hong Lei frowned.

“...May I inquire what you just said?”

“Actually, we intended to inform you a few days later...”

Another madam hushed her voice.

“We hope that you reconsider your marriage with Ming Li-san.”

“Why mention that now?”

Hong Lei's voice became that of a dying beast groaning. Despite that, the madams never once frowned. As to be expected of the queens ruling Kabukicho at night.

“This is an internal matter for the Huangs. There is no need to abide by your wishes.”

One of them, an oldest looking plump madam in a red ruqun[9], walking to the front of all the ladies.

“We heard that Miss' father has returned to Hong Kong, and is hired by the Beng Ya Association. If you are so insistent on getting married to someone of that indecent organization, we can no longer believe in the Huangs or even hand our funds over to yu. I want to void my contract with the Coalition.”

Hong Lei widened his eyes in shock, and the ladies voiced their threats one after another.

“Our company and employees are all looking to void the contract.”

“Right, our retail chain will do likewise.”

“Our family members too will like to void the contract.”

“Impossible.”

Hong Lei appeared to be impatient, and he cursed quietly.

“Ming Li already broke all ties with Hanada Masaru, and has no contact with him. How can she possibly have any relation to the –”

He stopped midway through, sensing something was amiss, and shut up. After pondering for a little while, he spoke up unhappily.

“...No, that's just an excuse, right? What is the real reason?”

The atmosphere shook slightly, and the temperature seemed to rise.

The madams looked at each other, and snickered.

“Always the sharp kid there.”

“Young Lord, we can't explain the real reason. This is shameful for us after all.”

Huang Hong Lei really had a keen, wire cutter-like instinct. He turned back, and glared at—

Me, lying limp by the fence.

“...Did you do this?”

His voice and expression terrified me, and it felt as though I had a frozen ice pillar implaed at my gut. Hong Lei, and even Min-san widened their eyes at me. I really regretted not running away earlier, but it was all too late. If I remained silent, I definitely wouldn't be able to settle this situation.

Thus, I pulled myself up from the fence, barely straightening myself, and my limp knees were limber as I stood up.

“What did you do?”

Hong Lei approached me, and I hastily lifted my chest proudly as a facade,

staring at him right in the eyes.

“I didn't do anything.”

My voice was trembling. Calm down. Think what I have to say first. It doesn't matter whether I anger him now; I need to agitated him some more, and deliver the final blow.

“Just request all the madams earnestly, and accept their goodwill.”

“What—”

“Actually, it wasn't me.”

Hong Lei stood still, the skeptical look on his face spreading into frozen astonishment.

There was no need to explain, Hong Lei probably knew what we did exactly, and understood where his weaknesses were.

You guys now looked as though you own everything as you walk down the most bustling area in this country, but you were just hoodlums in the past. You were chased out of your hometown, went far beyond the seas to a foreign country where you had no support, and could only rely on your compatriots—the women who lived on strongly in the night cities, using their bodies as weapons. No? And so you guys protected them from violent threats, and absorbed wealth, solidified your territory, regrouped your organization, and built your own fortress. However, just by looking down at your feet, you'll understand that the ones supporting you till this point had been the women making a living through the night lives. You guys still remain under their control, and this is the power I found, the power that surpassed yours.

“Please don't forget.”

I uttered each word, and felt heartbroken at the same time. Despite this, I continued staring at Hong Lei, saying.

“You need to trample those women below your feet to survive, but in this city, there's one person who can bring several hundred women like them to heaven with a single smile.”

I didn't say that person's name, but Huang Hong Lei probably knew who it was.

Please don't forget,

The name of the man who opposed you.

We were on a car headed towards M High School, but Min-san was utterly fuming.

“So what's different from charging in and causing a ruckus? You idiot!”

I, seated at the co-passenger seat, pulled my neck in. Luckily, Min-san was driving, and had no hands to beat me.

“Tetsu's probably caught now, and Major's definitely going to get murdered. Couldn't you have thought of a better plan?”

“Sorry...”

Again, I underestimated Huang Hong Lei. That man's instinct was way beyond our imagination. He probably understood what was going on the moment the electricity went out, contacted the people on the first floor to provide support in the basement. I wonder if Major's okay? The Hirasaka-gumi members were also trounced badly, and Yondaime's still there to clean up the mess. Because of my clumsy plan, everyone involved got battered hard. Luckily, those madams showed up to save us.

“So, where's Hiro?”

“I really don't know. Hiro's not in the operations, and I didn't tell him the plan on that day. But, he's probably—”

At that ceremony. That was the only logical explanation.

Besides the few madams, there were a lot of Hiro's female friends in the welcomed guests, so it probably wasn't hard for him to sneak in as one of the supposed guests.

It had been 3 mere days since I thought of the 'kidnap the woman', and Hiro no only contacted all the Chinese madams he had affairs with, and even boasted that he was going to start new relationships. However, even Hiro had targets he couldn't contact, or couldn't invite because they were busy. 3 days soon passed, so I had intention to forcefully interrupt the wedding on the day itself, stop the

Huangs' wedding gathering at at night, and a few days later, bring the madams along to negotiate.

But Hiro didn't think of this way.

He was a natural at wooing ladies, a hunter of love, and of course, he would choose the perfect opportunity when all the targetted ladies were gathered, today's gathering, to take action. It was probably during the short time, less than two hours, that he would duck through the ladies at the crowd, say a few words to get on their good side, and successfully get everyone to opposite this wedding. This godly act was really unbelievable, but I couldn't think of any other possibilities.

However, that godlik skill was a double-edged sword.

“That irresponsible guy!”

Min-san slammed the steering wheel a few times.

“He actually proposed to me so earnest, and to think...those ladies were all married too! What was he thinking!?”

Well, it's true that this would surely wreck Hiro's love, and that both him and Huang Hong Lei took their losses. When I first thought of this plan, I really didn't know how to request Hiro.

“Seriously! I saw he was doing decent in the ramen shop, and thought he had a real change of heart to do well. And then, argh, ahh damn it.”

However—I nonchalantly heard Min-san's grumbles, and thought,

He probably still had a chance, I guess?

At this point, Min-san showed no signs of hating him, and was simply, just completely furious. If she had no feelings for a man, she wouldn't be so angry at him laying his hands on a few hundred women...right?

“Narumi! What are you grinning away for?”

Min-san's growl his my right ear.

“Call Ayaka right now! I'm going to speed up and reach in 15 minutes or so!”

“Ah, ye-yes.”

The car accelerated, and I nearly dropped my phone.

We reached the school in less than 10 minutes. The school gate was glamorously decorated, and the banners hanging from the roof practically covered all the walls of the school. There were the classes' booths in the yard, and the visitors packed the place so much it was impossible to get through. The bustling school broadcast had some background music playing, but I couldn't tell what it was at all. There were sandwich men and bunny girls holding placards to attract customers, even touting outside the school.

The bustling celebratory activities were about to begin, and I had a feeling that I was going to faint.

Min-san and I got out from the car at the parking lot, and we attracted a lot of attention. Min-san came directly from the wedding, and she was wearing a glamorous dress no inferior to a Bond girl.

The moment she stepped into the classroom of 2-4, the commotion increased by 5 times, or even 10 times.

“What's with that dress up, Min-san?”

“Did you participate in a photo shoot?”

“I want to take a photo! Is that fine?”

“Shut up. The customers are queuing up! Hurry up and work!”

The problem here is that the customers were excitedly drawing their cellphones out and taking photos of Min-san too...

As for me, I collapsed at the front end of the classroom that was segregated as the work place. The bunny maids holding the trays and going in and out were giving me stinging looks, but it was really worn out.

“Welcome back, Fujishima-kun!”

The bunny ears and the hem of the apron dress swayed as Ayaka came running towards me.

“Thank goodness Min-san made it in time. I'll go get the principal and the teachers.”

“Yeah, made it...can I have a little break ? Is there still some work for me?”

“Ah, it's fine. You can sit for your next work, Fujishima-kun. Actually, the committee wanted to do a review writeup for all the classes, so you can try all the ice cream our class made and write something like a food report?

Ayaka said that the review would affect the performances tomorrow, so I had no choice but to take this job. Back then, I completely forgot something critical. Our class 2-4 had 31 different flavors of ice cream sold.

And so, after eating the 5th ice cream, I had such a severe migraine that I collapsed, and had to finish the report in the infirmary.

Chapter 5

After the culture festival ended, our usual daily lives did not return immediately.

The shutters of 'Hanamaru' remained closed, and the signboard with the words 'Temporarily Closed' continued to flutter in the freezing winds of November.

The only thing that continued on like usual was the scene at the back door of the kitchen. I parked my bicycle by the shop like usual, and casually poked my head to look between the buildings. Tetsu-senpai was wearing a half-sleeved shirt with no regard for the season, while Major's face was completely covered in bandages. Both of them were seated there, the horse racing news column laid out as they excitedly talked about their predictions for the GI race in Autumn.

“Oh? You came back, Vice-Admiral Fujishima? Time to give us our pay for this case now, right?”

Major and Tetsu-senpai reached their hands out to me at the same time, and I could only avert my eyes.

“Well, actually, I haven’t received the payment from Min-san either…”

“What? We worked so hard there! I should have shown you that blazing solo escape operation I did, Vice Admiral Fujishima!”

In the end, Major managed to escape by himself from the electrical room in the basement that was filled with the Hong Kong mafia, and it was said that he sprayed a large amount of tear gas in his escape. Major’s the one who usually does the preparation work, so I was worried if he would be in any danger if there was any direct confrontation. However, this military nut wasn’t just for show.

“Seriously, good work there. I’ll try to haggle for more when I meet Min-san.”

“What has Master been doing recently anyway? She’s been going around

riding on Hiro's car…"

Tetsu-senpai shrugged,

"Is it possible that since that crazy plan worked, those two are going out together for real?"

"No, how's that possible?" I shook my head. "They're just going to the Suppliers together to apologize."

Huang Hong Lei was no longer intimidating the suppliers, and all they had to do was to apologize to these suppliers that got involved before 'Hanamaru' could continue operations again. However, this probably would take quite a long time, since they'll have to convince the many companies that the mafia wouldn't be looking for them, and that they would be able to continue doing business with 'Hanamaru' without any worries. In such situations, Hiro, ever the smooth talk, was very important.

In other words, the relationship of those two was just employer and employer. Up till now anyway.

"Huh? You don't think they can hook up for real, Narumi?"

"Who knows? Hiro still gets involved with so many girls he has to break off with…"

"I'll bet that they won't get together then, five thousand yen!" Major put in a wager.

"In that case, I'll bet that they won't get together for ten thousand yen." Tetsu-senpai joined in.

"In that case, I bet that they won't get together for one thousand yen."

"This isn't a proper bet now, right?" Senpai chuckled.

Hiro's car came back at sunset, ferrying Min-san.

"We're mostly done with our trip, and we should be able to open our shop again next week." Min-san said, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Thank goodness, I had no intention of pushing her to pay the detective fees and tell her, Just pay when the business stabilizes.

Min-san began dealing with the ingredients along with Hiro in the dim room, and suddenly sighed as she said,
“All that’s left is the issue of the dried stuff. The reserves here won’t last us for 2 months. Matsugahara Tradings’ still the most convenient one…the quality and prices of the other shops aren’t that good.”

Hiro and I exchanged glances. Matsugahara Tradings. Due to my careless slip of the news, the boss was beaten up and interrogated for Hanada Masaru’s whereabouts. Ever since then, he wouldn’t do business with ‘Hanamaru’ again.

“Erm, I-I’ll go apologize as well.”

I made this request in a self-reproaching manner. Hiro placed his hand on my shoulder as he looked up at Min-san, and the latter could only nod with a reluctant look on her face.

Before we made a call, Min-san gave a call to Matsugahara Tradings. “Eh? Ah, I see…yes.” It seemed she heard some unexpected response.

“I’ll be waiting. That’s what he said.”

Min-san said as we got onto the car. Both Hiro and I exchanged shocked looks.

The car raced down the Tomei Expressway for more than an hour, and finally reached the reclusive street located in the suburbs of Yokohama, parked at the door of the trading house that looked like a garage.

“Oh? Hanada-san. It’s been a while. Looks like you’ve been busy recently.”

The boss of Matsugahara went out of the shop to welcome us. There was no doubt that he was the one who shooed Hiro and me away half a month ago. Something must have happened.

“A few days ago, that, somewhat young yakuza looking Chinese came by again, and even brought a large box of sweets and apologized to me over and over again, so I was starting to feel sorry…”

“…Hong Lei?” Min-san widened her eyes.

“Ah, yes, those kids seem to call him that too. I heard about it.”

“About what?”

"Actually, I forgot which day last month it was, but Masaru-san suddenly gave me a call after we haven't met for so long, and it really shocked me. He said he had something to request me, and sounded really serious."

I gasped.

It was on the night of the incident. Right, when he made his escape to the doctor, he made two phone calls. One of them was to Huang Xiao Ling-san, and the other one was to this Matsugahara Tradings.

"Dad, did he say anything?" Min-san sounded slightly agitated as she pressed on, and the Matsugahara Tradings boss handed the parcel over to her."

The parcel was delivered from Hong Kong. As expected, Hanada Masaru did go to Hong Kong.

"He said that in a week's time, he'll send something over to you, and have me keep it for the time being. Also..."

According to him, Hanada Masaru said this as well,

"If Ming Li is to come to this shop, and ask you to continue supplying her, if she intends to continue running the ramen shop—can you please hand this parcel over to her?"

While we were on the way back, Min-san opened the parcel with shaking hands. It was wrapped in layers of oil paper. She took out the contents, and gasped. I, seated beside her, was at a loss of words.

"What's...this...why..."

Min-san muttered, sounding teary as the tears landed on the parcel, the thick stacks.

How many were there? All the notes were 10,000 Yen each. These 1cm bundles were wrapped in white tape, and there were 16 of them in all.

16 million Yen.

That was the exact amount—as the debt 'Hanamaru' owed.

"What's with this?"

Min-san continued to mutter.

"What was dad thinking in the first place...he actually hid such a large sum of money. But why? Why now...?"

I had the exact same thoughts at Min-san at this point. Why did he only send the money over at this point? Was that the money he saved up from working in the Underworld? But why...why didn't he return it to the Huang Coalition soon? Min-san didn't have to go through so much!

Hanada Masaru, where are you right now? What are you doing?

What is your objective?

Min-san again wrapped the stacks of bills, and embraced them at her chest, averting my eyes as she pressed her cheeks on the car window, looking at the clouds.

Hiro did not say anything as he stepped on the accelerator. The acceleration forced our unspoken words to the distant past.

The next Monday, 'Ramen Hanamaru' celebrated its grand opening.

Though I might say this, the furbishing inside and the menu did not change. It was mostly the same as usual, the only change being the employees. Hiro was fired because of his womanizing habit, and Ayaka returned to work.

The number of customers that showed up on that day was a lot more than the two days when it was rumored 'Hanamaru'would close down, and it was said to have easily surpassed the most number of customer visits.

It was great that everyone could live happily ever after...if the endings to all stories were like that, how easy would it be for us?

However, I remained a detective's assistant, so the story I composed was fated to have a detective show up.

On a certain chilly Sunday night in November, Alice summoned me over. I rode

my bicycle to 'Hanamaru', and on the way there, I had a feeling.

I nodded to Min-san, who was busy going around in the kitchen, and darted up the emergency staircase. I opened the door to the detective agency, and found Alice getting off the bed. Unlike the usual, she was not wearing pajamas, and the lights in the bedroom showed a pitch black figure.

Alice's face was hidden under a black veil, and I could not decipher her appearance.

"You don't look surprised." The detective said.

"I think I have an idea as to what it's about."

"Being my assistant, you seem to have grown a little bit, huh?"

This time, I realized Alice was being sad behind the veil.

The detective was wearing mourning clothing.

That meant that she had dug up the words of the dead buried deep within the ground, and was to speak for the case, this incident that had not progressed.

"But are you serious about riding my bicycle there?"

\line "If you aren't happy about it, go get a driver's license when you're 18. Get this clear now, I'm 5,000 times more upset about riding on that bicycle than you are!"

Then don't ride on it.

""S-shut up! Alright, let's go!"

We walked down the emergency staircase, and the back door opened.

"Hey Alice, it's about time to go—"

Min-san poked her face out, and upon seeing Alice's mourning clothing, looked confused.

"Aren't you tired of wearing such clothing? And you're going to wear that while riding on a single-seat bicycle with Narumi? Don't you feel embarrassed?"

"What are you saying! This is the most formal clothing for a NEET! You don't have the right to criticize my attire when your shoulders are always exposed,

Master!"

"Shut up and let me be! This is the battle attire of a ramen shop own! You're going to look for Xiao Ling, right?"

Alice nodded as she curled her lips in annoyance.

"Have you made the gift, Master?"

Wait a moment, Min-san said, and went into the kitchen, soon appearing again with a little box in hand.

"It's a special. It probably won't melt in this cold weather, but it's best if you send it over quickly."

Physically or mentally, it was torturing to ride a bicycle with a girl wearing a long skirt down the Meiji Highway. I guess those without the experience wouldn't understand, huh? The pedestrians were looking at us, and we had to cycle into a side alley when we encountered the traffic police. Furthermore, when we were at places of different elevations, making emergency brakes or sudden turns, Alice would keep on grumbling, and yet cling onto me firmly when I accelerated. I really started to doubt if there were scars forming on my chest.

"I-I don't want to ride on such a barbaric transport again!"

I think you said these words before...

From the corner of my eyes, I glanced at the vehicles and the headlights moving along the roads, and i started to think. I might have changed slightly over this one year; this might be true for Alice too.

At the very least, she had been going out recently. When we first met, she was a complete shut in.

Also, whenever she went out, it seemed to always be with me. Could I really be gleeful for this? I didn't know how much of the ugly truth Alice would reveal, and I couldn't really understand the emptiness in her heart, but just having her cling onto me to shield her from the wind was delightful enough for me.

All the floors on the building located near the Shinjuku garden were lit, and the logo of the Zodiac Company appeared in the night sky.

It seemed Alice did arrange for an appointment beforehand, and after the receptionist made a call, it was actually Xiao Ling-san who came out to greet us. Seeing the mourning clothes on Alice, she was again speechless, but this time, I didn't mind.

"Ah, well, please don't mind. This is just a little ceremony."

"Seriously, you, since you're going out with her, at least give her some normal clothing already, okay?"

Again, XIao Ling-san said such unnecessary words, and it infuriated Alice so much she was steaming, howling, "Wh-wh-wh-who's dating who? Be clear on this!" I could only prompt Xiao Ling-san to bring us into the elevator quickly. If any other visitor was to see someone in such clothing yelling in front of the reception counter, it would be hard to explain.

XIao Ling-san's room was 3 times bigger than the NEET detective agency, and was tidy, but there was a presence similar to Alice's room. The completely practical metal rack were stacked with all kinds of electronics, and it certain felt like a room belonging to a tech wiz. I thought there would be no decorations in the room, but I found a little doll placed at the side of the rack. Before we were prompted to sit, Alice had already taken a corner of the sofa and heaved a sigh of rlief.

"This room's really comforting. It feels kind of familiar."

"Then try cleaning up your room until it's like this."

"You should say this to Narumi."

"Do some cleanup yourself!"

"You can just argue all you want, but I still have lots of things to do. If you have something, make it snappy."

XIao Ling-san said as she sat opposite us, and I could only pull my neck back in as I sat beside Alice.

After peering into the coffee cup, Xiao Ling-san stammered as she began.

"Xiang Yu called me later on, and kept on telling me to keep thanking Ming Li and yu two...her life right now probably isn't easy, but she never complained at all. They were practically penniless when they eloped, but Xiang Yu was pampered since young, so i don't know how long they can last..."

It sounded harsh, but Xiao Ling-san's tone was really gentle.

"Since this is Xiang Yu's own choice, she can't blame others for this. Even if her life won't be as pleasant down the road, that will be their responsibility."

Xiao Ling-san suddenly glanced up to look at me.

"You're pretty good there..."

"Eh? Ah, well, it's nothing."

"After that, the entire family had quite a few meetings. Back then, Hong Lei's reactions were so agitated, and grandfather fainted from anger a few times—to be honest, I was really wondering whether I should tell you that, but whatever. It's our shame as the Huangs."

No, you saying it...is basically reporting it to us now, right?

"Oh yes, has that unrestrained gigolo been dumped by Ming Li?"

"That appears to be the case, more or less."

"Then, that's good."

Hong Lei probably wouldn't just give up like this, and would go for a direct

proposal, right? Xiao Ling-san chuckled as she said. To be honest, I was one of many who felt relieved seeing Min-san break away from Hiro. The best outcome for Min-san's happiness was for Huang Hong Lei to give up on being the triad boss and promise Min-san to run the ramen shop together. But this probably won't happen...

After chatting a while about the Huangs', XIao Ling-san said.

"Now then, is that anything from you two?"

Her eyes went from looking at me, to Alice.

"Narumi, the present from before."

Ah, I forgot about it. I handed the box of ice cream over to Xiao Ling-san.

“Heh? From Ming Li? Do I open it?'

Xiao Ling-san opened the box, and some white mist from the dry ice floated out, revealing the ice cream cake beneath it. There was a layer of vanilla ice cream, with lots of purple, red fruits and nuts all over it, and same brown sauce doused over.

“Doici dei Moriti...”

Alice peeked at the contents in the box, muttering.

“Oh? An Italian dessert? Sounds delicious. I'll try it later. And then?”

Xiao Ling-san closed the box, and gave Alice and me a cold look.

“Are you just intending to send ice cream over to us? What about Ming Li herself? Hong Lei and I caused her much trouble, so if there are still any issues...”

“No, we're just here to deliver the ice cream.”

Xiao Ling-san widened her eyes, and I too couldn't help but turn my head towards alice.

“But not to you, Huang Xiao Ling. It's for Hanada Masaru.”

Xiao Ling-san again narrowed her eyes.

“...What do you mean?”

“I'm a NEET detective, a speaker of the dead. A person who strives to dig up

the truths hidden under the graves, and reclaim the honor off the dead, to hurt the living”

“What are you trying to get at?”

“In other words, I'm here to see Hanada Masaru.”

“What did you say?”

Xiao Ling-san was trembling for some reason. Perhaps it was because I, listening in on this too, was rattled as well?

“Didn't he fly to Hong Kong? I don't know whether that's true, but he can't possible be,:”

“He's right here.”

Alice slowly raised the hand under the black sleeve and pointed at Xiao Ling-san's chest.

“Hanada Masaru is in your pocket, the cellphone in your pocket. Am I correct?”

What felt like the pain of all the glass windows in the world shattering descended upon the atmosphere in the room. Xiao Ling-san's eyes too showed a frozen skepticism. I did not understand the meaning behind Alice's words, and I turned to stare at her sidelong face again.

“What...do you mean?” I couldn't help but ask, unable to hide my rattled emotions in my words. The detective's sullen face turned towards me.

“Narumi, you did see Huang Xiang Yu and Umeda Kouji personally, right? Think about it. Among those two, who looked injured?”

The black veil swayed according to Alice's question. I held my breath as I recalled. When we received Xiao Ling-san's contact, Yondaime, Min-san and I went to the Zodiac employee dormitory, and in the basement parking lots, met the duo who intended to elope.

“Injured...well...they didn't look really injured there...”

“Right, that's the answer. There were gunshots heard on that night, and there were blood stains in the room and the co-passenger seat, but Huang Xiang Yu

and Umeda Kouji were completely unscathed—in that case, there's only one possibility, that the one who was shot was Hanada Masaru.”

I held my arm firmly, trying to suppress the chill rising up my body. Xiao Ling-san's face paled, and she bit her lips hard. Alice continued,

“That's the reason why the co-passenger seat had blood traces on it. Hanada Masaru himself couldn't drive, so he could only give instructions on the co-passenger seat, and had Umeda Kouji drive him towards the clinic in Ookubo. And then, he died there.”

Died.

Hanada Masaru was dead.

Did he really die?

No, wait. Alice...this is weird. This outcome's really weird.

“I can only deduce the truth that happened on that night. The one who fired at Hanada Masaru was Huang Xiang Yu, right? Since Hanada Masaru's a mercenary, there was no way he could have let Umeda Kouji slip through. Xiang Yu might have misunderstood that her bodyguard would kill her bodyguard, and in her haste, shot Hanada Masaru from behind.”

“Wait!”

I interrupted Alice's words without hesitation.

“No, wait, this reasoning's too weird. I-I,”

I did feel my cellphone vibrate in my hand, and I did personally hear his voice.

“I did receive calls from Hanada Masaru! Not only me, even Min-san and Hong Lei did!”

Right, even Xiao Ling-san seated there did receive calls.

Alice's eyes remained gloomy, and shook her head.

“Think back about it. Wasn't the timing almost too perfect when Hanada Masaru called?”

Timing.

It's true that whenever we got new information, Hanada Masaru would call to guide us. It felt as though he was watching over us by the side or something.

But that was not the case.

The one watching over us the entire time wasn't Hanada Masaru.

I lifted my eyes. Xiao Ling-san was seated in front of me.

Xiao Ling-san was always around. When Hanada Masaru first called the office, it was through her phone. When the call was made to me, it was after I visited her. When the call was made to Hong Lei in front of the ramen shop, Xiao Ling-san was present.

“So Hanada Masaru was there.”

Again, Alice pointed at Xiao Ling-san's chest. The latter curled her lips, reaching her hand out, and touched the protruding thing at her chest.

“That night, Hanada Masaru knew that he likely would not survive from his gunshot wounds, and had the doctor try to extend his life for a little longer, using his final moments to give a phone call to Huang Xiao Ling, you. His aim was to have you record his voice. He thought of the possibilities that might happen after he died, trying his best to ensure that Huang Xiang Yu could continue on the run, and leave a message to us without involving 'Hanamaru' was by pretending to be alive. Huang Xiao Ling, it's because of your careful editing and voice manipulation based on the moments that you managed to completely hide the fact that Hanada Masaru was dead.”

Xiao Ling-san remained silent, and would not make any reply, a stoic look remained on her face.

Thus, I instinctively realized that whatever Alice said was the truth. Despite this, I could not help but be skeptical, for I was unwilling to believe this truth.

“Why? Why did he have to do that much? Isn't that too weird?”

“Is there any other reason to it?”

At that moment, Alice suddenly grabbed my thigh firmly. The pain in her heart entered my heart directly.

“There's only one reason to pretend that he's still alive. He didn't wish for

anyone to know about this, and more importantly, didn't one a certain person to be sad about this. He felt that , rather have that person cry for him, he might as well have her hate him forever.”

Because,

He didn't want Min-san to know.

He hoped that Min-san would continue to think that he remained alive. To fulfill Hanada Masaru's wish, Xiao Ling-san kept using random phones to revive in front of Min-san, to have her hear his voice.

But I could only continue to shake my head. This truth was too tragic. No matter what happened, nobody could change it...

“This is just...”

My stammering voice slipped out from my throat.

“It's just your own deduction, right? Alice? Like what you said, it's an unconfirmed truth, or something, just a meaningless theory, right?”

I really wished Alice would tell me that, and that she would agree with my words. However, the detective pinched my thigh harder, looking at the floor as she shook her head.

“Think about it carefully, that money that was placed at Matasugahara Tradings, where was it sent from?”

16 million yen.

That money could clear all the debts 'Hanamaru' owed, and was the last gift from Hanada Masaru.

“Wasn't it from Hong Kong? It proves that he's there, and still alive, right?”

“Actually, the Bengya Association always had a bounty on Hanada Masaru, who used to work as a bodyguard for the Huang Coalition.”

My throat was stuffed by a scorching breath.

“That doctor called Choi went to Hong Kong alone, probably bringing a part of Hanada Masaru's body himself, something that could be used as prove. That money was...”

“That's enough, Alice, I understand now.”

I couldn't listen on anymore. Even through the black veil, I couldn't look at the detective's face again, and I couldn't look at Xiao Ling-san's face, while she continued to remain quiet.

What kind of feeling was that? I couldn't help but wonder.

When the scorching bullet was in his heart, when he could practically hear death sneaking up on him, what was Hanada Masaru thinking? Was he thinking of the woman who resembled the wife he so loved, and the daughter he bore with the wife he so loved? He departed for the afterlife, breaking away from his daughter when they did not understand each other, and he never was able to speak to her again. Yet he saved his own voice as data, imagining the moments when he would temporarily revive, conveying his voice, yet his daughter's reply would never reach his ears again. Are you really—

Are you really satisfied with just this?

I sat back dejectedly, but I could feel Alice beside me standing up.

“Thus, I'm just here to deliver that serving of ice cream. That's the last promise made between the Hanadas.”

Hearing those words, my consciousness nearly melted. It was that moment, back when Hanada Masaru came back to visit 'Hanamaru' in April, that he left the final message under the cardboard box.

Next time, when I come back, I'll try some of your ice cream—

In the end, in such a cold place?

Xiao Ling-san never did respond to any of Alice's claims. Right when we were about to leave the room however, she raised the box of ice cream cake, saying.

“Thanks. I'll definitely deliver it to Masaru-san.”

We exited the building, and the night air was colder than before. The exhaust noises of the cars pricked my feeble ears. Under the dim road lights, I held the bicycle saddle, and stood there for a long time. Alice grabbed the belt of my duffle coat, and like me, stared silently deep into the dark forest of Shinjuku

garden.

The headlights and taillights of the cars passed by in front of us many times, leaving behind scars of light in the dark horizon. A scar vanished, and another would appear, and this continued on over and over again. I didn't have the strength to kick the stand of the bicycle.

“Narumi.”

Alice's feeble mutter felt as though it would be crushed by the car noises.

“It's cold.”

Feeling disbelief, I lowered my head to look at Alice's face.

“...This is the first time I'm hearing you say those words from your mouth, Alice.”

I always thought her body functions might have lacked some sensors to feel cold.

“It feels like, there's a large empty block right in the middle of my body, and that you seem really distant from me. I guess this feeling too can only be described as cold?”

Thinking hard about it, wouldn't running around in fluttery mourning clothes on a November night be a stupid way to getting colds immediately? I removed my duffle coat, and had Alice wear it. The large eyes under the veil looked skeptical.

“U-u? I-I didn't ask you to do this! I'm just saying that it's cold.”

No, I don't understand what you mean. Just wear it.

“And this clothing has some of your body warmth left. It feels disgusting!”

“What's bad about that! It proves that people are alive.”

“What nonsense are you saying?”

After chatting some useless words, I finally had some drive to get up on the bicycle. I kicked the stand off, and Alice continued grumbling as she got up onto the back seat, her arms wrapped around my waist.

The pedals of the bicycle were as heavy as frozen concrete, so we continued

forward little by little. The night breeze meeting us from the front wiped my tears into the darkness, and all that was left was regret.

“Oh yeah, Alice...”

“What?”

Alice's voice was right by my ear, and I was slightly relieved.

“So what was the significance of that anyway?”

“What?”

“Everything Hanada Masaru did.”

“For self-satisfaction. So that he'll be able to die happy. I guess he's satisfied now.”

Alice conveyed those words, and truly, those were the worst words from the dead.

“If it's just to protect those still alive, there are other better methods to that. He actually wanted to continue lying, and had everyone be a little hurt.

”Yeah.”

“And Master definitely figured it out a long time ago.”

I felt the hands holding the handlebar freezing, and that they would shatter on first contact. I barely managed to steady the wobbly bicycle, pressing down the brakes as we slowly passed a dark downslope.

“...She knew?”

“Probably...”

“How, w-why—”

“That ice cream cake is called Dolci del Morti. The malt represents the body of Jesus Christ, the grape juice represents the blood of Jesus Christ, while the pomegranates and walnuts represent life and death. It's a pastry the Italians offer to the dead during funerals.”

I gulped.

A pastry for the dead.

Min-san already knew, she knew that the thing Alice requested her to do was for Hanada Masaru, who was no longer on this world.

But even so, she showed a usual expression, like it was a favor, and she handed the cake over to me? . That fortitude caused me to nearly shed tears again. What was that? Really? Why's everyone like this.

“Speaking of which.”

Likely, I was pedaling on the bicycle, and Alice wouldn't be able to hear me sobbing.

“Actually, whatever Hanada Masaru did was for nothing, right? He died like an idiot, and never left, left anything behind.”

“That may be the case.”

But as we passed by the train tracks, around the park, and into the familiar dead end of an alley , I inadvertently stopped pedaling.

A few figures could be seen through the light in the night shining past the red curtains.

Nothing was left behind, no, that was a lie. Even this stupid, dull-witted me figured it out.

I heard Ayaka's voice as she repeated the customers' orders, the unruly laughter of the drunk customers, and the flames coming out from a Chinese wok. I approached the shop, and through the gap in the curtain, I could see the gray tank top, the beautiful, bare shoulders, and hear that family voice. Kept you waiting! It's your soy sauce ramen! We have only matcha ice cream today. Anyone who wants it, please raise your hands! You drank too much! I'm not serving you beer anymore! Hey, Ayaka! The gyoza's done! Thank you very much, please come back again...

“it's strange. For some reason, today,”

I could hear Alice mutter,

“I suddenly thought of having some scalding ramen.”

“...Yeah, me too.”

And just like that, the story of the man called 'Bear Knuckles' came to an end. I only have a little story about him to tell everyone.

This is a little story born because of him, so I wish to say this ending as discreetly as possible.

During the time Christmas was about to arrive, there was some discussion on the internet regarding Zodiac's portal site. Once Sagittarius was over, the logo on the site changed. It was supposed to be time for Capricorn, but there was the constellation of the Big Dipper, and this caused many internet users to discuss the reasons behind it on the news websites, and message boards.

It seemed however that nobody knew the reason behind it.

The Big Dipper, the 'Ursa Major'[10], was holding a Christmas cake in its clutches, with pomegranates and walnuts toppings. Those that realized that was even fewer.

Every year end, if you're to head to a certain little ramen shop in Tokyo, you'll be able to try this Christmas cake that differs from the usual. If anyone who finishes this story is interested, I do hope that you'll make a trip there. Even till now, the real name of 'Bear Knuckles' remain on the shops' curtains.

Gigolo-sensei, the Last Lecture

Shionji Gorou, a name said to be neither an artiste's name or an alias, but the man's actual name. It appeared that his reputation as a gigolo (Gorou) was not because of his own will, but of a divine will.

In any case, he really was a peculiar man. Even discounting that he's Alice's relative, it would be hard to think of him as a normal person. He had professed himself to be of an age where he was a little hard of hearing, yet there were times where he would suddenly show a boyish smile, sometimes appearing like a celestial who lived in a different worl for thousands of years. He was a thorough scoundrel that even his disciple Hiro was a lot cuter in that case, but he had some unique charismatic element to him (or he wouldn't be able to live on as a gigolo). Thinking that I wouldn't be able to meet him again, and that I had no chance to talk to him, I felt somewhat melancholic.

And upon hearing me say that, Hiro teased,

“If it had been you instead of me who met Gorou-sensei in middle school, I wonder how good you'll have it, Narumi?”

I pondered slightly.

“No, I'll pass on that. Please spare me already. I still treasure my life dearly.”

Hiro could not help but laugh out loud.

It was in mid-November, when the days were frosty enough, when Gorou-sensei dropped by at 'Ramen Hanamaru'. Back then, Min-san was out to buy ingredients, and Ayaka was left alone in the shop to prepare. I too went to the kitchen to prepare the ingredients, and after peeling the onion skins, I was chopping the cabbage.

“Excuse me.”

The door opened, and a diminutive figure in a trenchcoat walked in.ThThe door opened, and a diminutive figure in a trenchcoat walked in.

When I first saw him, I assumed that he was a retired college professor. He was wearing a round wool cap a Russian would wear, and the soft greyish-white hair was poking out. The round glasses rested on the thin nose bridge, and he looked really unreliable.

"Welcome. Erm, sorry, but we're only opened at 5..."

Ayaka said as she lifted her head from the basin.

"No no, I'm not here to have a meal."

The man, early into his old age, took off his cap, and smiled.

"I'm here to visit a little Miss here. I heard that she's the boss here..."

"Are you looking for Min-san? Sorry, she just went out. It's cold outside. Do you want to come in and wait?"

Thank you. The old man said, and closed the door behind him. I stirred the sesame, thinking that it was a rare sight. that someone would visit Min-san. Ayaka went around the counter, took a tablecloth to wipe the counter, and ushered him, saying, *Please have a seat. It's a little dirty though, so don't mind.*

"Oh? Isn't that a Holly?" Saying that, the man reached his tiny hand for Ayaka's ear.

“Eh?”

Ayaka cringed back in shock. The old man's fingertips grazed her hair and skin lightly.

“See? There are a few flowers on your head.”

A tiny white flower was tucked between the fingers of the old man.

“Ah, they probably latched onto me when I was pruning at school...”

“You have interest in botany, don't you?”

“Ah, yes. I'm also in charge of leading everyone in school at that.” Saying that, Ayaka was a little gleeful.

“It's really rare to have such charming women so suited for wearing such white flowers! I suppose this flower here latched onto you because it likes you.”

“Eh-eh?”

“Well, it is to be expected. If I'm a flower, I too would do the same.”

“th-that's.” Ayaka's cheeks were blushing.

“Hahaha, please don't mind! I'm just grateful to spend some waiting time with a girl like you. Besides the Holly, what other flowers do bloom in this season? Since it's a school, I'm guessing there should be Camellia, Cydonia, and Loquats, right?”

“Yeah. The Camellias are blooming beautifully now...”

Soon after, Ayaka was chatting with the old man. I eavesdropped on their conversation, and Ayaka was enthusiastically chatting on the type of boy she liked, as though they were already on familiar times.

However, I remained wary against that old man, for I personally witnessed his shocking finger actions. The issue at end was the Holly that established the topic. If the white flower was on Ayaka's head, I would have discovered it first beforehand. In fact, the Holly was on Ayaka's shoulder, on the school blouse, but he was like a magician; he pinched the flower, and placed it on her hair, acting as if it was there the entire time, and took it off from her.

Why did he have to do this?

In any case, this man was no ordinary person, so my instincts told me. There's a dangerous presence on him, and he was very similar to a certain someone I knew. Who was it?

At this moment, there was a terrifying ringing in my pocket. The guitar riff of 'Colorado Bulldog', a phone call from Alice.

“Tie up that lowlife in front of your eyes right now!”

The astonishing growl from the phone hit my brain. I hurriedly covered the phone and ran to the back door to prevent the old man from hearing it, but it was too late.

“Don't let him approach Ayaka! Do anything you have to do, best if you

mobilize a strike team or the JSDF! Get Major here and shoot him with a stungun!”

“N-no, calm down, Alice.”

Ayaka's eyes widened greatly, and I peeked at her as I answered Alice. Ayaka probably heard anything.

“What? Didd something happen?”

“Hahaha. It appears I was found out. Speaking of which, I did hear that there were surveillance cameras installed around this building.”

Saying that, the old man picked up his cap. I covered the phone speaker and stared right at him.

He knew that there were cameras all around the detective agency? Speaking of which...

“...Erm, are you related to Alice?”

“Sorry for the late introductions. I'm Shionji Gorou.”

The old man reached his hand over the counter to me.

“I'm Yuuko's great uncle.”

“Which countries have you been wandering around at!?”

The moment Gorou-sensei stepped into the detective agency, Alice, seated on the bed, slammed the mattress hard as she hollered.”

“Why, all kinds of places. You've become prettier there, Yuuko. My biggest pride is that I knew you would become a pretty one when you were 3 years old —”

“That's not important! I got a lot of things to ask you, so sit down there! Narumi, get some Dr. Pepper for him!”

I see, so she treats him like a valued guest...for Alice, serving someone Dr. Pepper was the best form of courtesy. However, Gorou-sensei saw the red can I took out from the fridge, and shook his head.

“You don't have to. I can't possibly drink that...”

“Ah, I see. You Well, I guess. Shall I brew some hot tea for you?”

It's been cold recently, and though Alice had been complaining, she allowed me to brew tea in the office. However, sensei shook his head.

“No, I don't need a drink.”

But before he could finish, he covered his mouth, and started coughing, his arched back cringing

“Are you alright?”

“Feeling unwell?”

Even Alice got off the bed to Gorou-sensei's side. Sensei lifted his head, and smiled weakly behind those round glasses of his.

“It's nothing. I'm just getting old. Speaking of which, you've really become prettier...”

Sensei patted Alice's head gently, and unexpectedly, she wasn't resisting nor angry about it, merely displeased as she sat beneath sensei's little hand. She really hated being treated as a kid though.

“You're really starting to resemble your mother. I really hope to see you in 5, 10 years time, but I don't know if I'll be able to meet you again.”

“What now? Did you come all the way here to inform me about the Shionjis?”

Alice waved off sensei's hand, and said,

“This isn't my main objective, I should at least mention that. Oh yes.”

At this moment, sensei's stare was suddenly directed at me, standing beside the fridge.

“As for this boy, I suppose he's your lover, Yuuko?”

Alice's face immediately turned beetroot, and I hurriedly squatted in a corner of the kitchen, and covered my ears. The clanking sounds echoed continuously in the room like a machine gun.

“Narumi, get out right now!”

I was chased out of the office, and sat on the stairwell of the emergency staircase, mumbling away as I thought.

Alice's relative? Didn't she come here because she cut off all ties with her family? Was it really fine to invite him inside directly? Speaking of which, who is that old man? He did something strange to Ayaka, and even got Alice to let down his guard. What's he working as? Maybe he might have the appearance of a college professor, but was actually a member of the yakuza?

All the questions were soon answered. Frantic footsteps could be heard from the emergency staircase, and there was a tall, slender body beneath the handrail,dressed in a posh cashmere coat.

“Narumi, I heard Gorou-sensei came by?”

It was Hiro.

“Sensei...in other words, of gigolo antics?”

“Ahh, yeah, you can say that.”

Hiro, seated beside me, gave a bashful grin.

“But it's not just in bluffing women! Sensei's my teacher in life too.”

“Yeah.”

“When I was in middle school, I was already living in the house of a hostess, and I didn't go to school at all. One day, the big sister who took care of me the entire time never returned home, and I went to the shop to ask mama, only to hear that a man lured all the ladies in the shop to a certain resort.”

“Is that man actually?” I pointed at the door of the detective agency behind me.

“Right. It's Gorou-sensei. That was the one and only time my woman got stolen by someone else.”

I had so many things I wanted to ask Hiro, like, what happened to that shop? Did it close down? Or, if he took all the ladies to the same villa, won't they get jealous and start fighting? But what intrigued me most was—

“I heard that he's the, erm, younger brother of Alice's grandfather?”

“Yeah. But I hardly heard her mention about this.”

As long as Alice herself refused to mention it, nobody would be certain on her family. There probably was a major reason as to why she left home at such a young age, but the NEETs who lived and supported each other in this city wouldn't inquire about each other's past. The NEETs understood this better than anyone else, and that gentle nonchalance really left me at ease. I wordlessly stared at the scenery between the buildings, and Hiro continued to talk about himself.

“As for what I just said...I didn't have a place to stay at, so I had to woo the one mama left behind at the shop, to see if she was willing to take me in.”

“You're terrible.” Though I already knew that.

“But mama had a yakuza man, so I got into a fight with him, my ear nearly got chopped off.”

Wah, your childhood's crazier than I thought.

“That yakuza guy eemed to believe that I stole all the women in the shop, but more than half of that's true, so I couldn't push the blame. At that moent, sensei just so happened to arrive at the shop, and I didn't know how he managed to pull a fast one on the man, but he managed to save me.”

“I see, so anyway, why did sensei return?”

“Same return as me. There was only mama left in the shop, so he came back to woo her.”

As for the ending to this shop, it was said that mama and all the ladies in the shop moved to Kamakura along with master, and managed another bar there. In other words, they escaped the yakuza and left Tokyo, moving their shop to a new haven. Congrats.

“...That's impossible!” I retorted without thinking.

“There is such a thing in the world. There are gigolo techniques in this world none of us can imagine...”

Hiro looked afar.

“Later on, I was taken care of by sensei, and learned a lot from him.”

A lot about love. Hiro laughed.

“For every woman I woo successfully, I have to to make her happy. This is the most important teaching from sensei. He said that as long as I made one unhappy, I couldn't be called a gigolo.”

“Hiro, I don't think you actually did that.”

“Well yes. I still can't match up to sensei. Because it's really unbelievable. Such a kind, understanding person who can take care of others and able to act and emphathize—would not work and have his women earn money for him.”

“That's really unbelivable! I never thought there's such a person on this world! Let alone two of them around me!”

“Ahaha.” Hiro patted me on the back. “But you got too be thankful for sensei. It's thanks to him that Alice got to know me, and why I'm here.”

“Eh...ah.”

So those two things were related?

“It seemed the Shionjis were rather prestigous, and whenever there was a birthday party, they would invite important officials and even the chairman of the Japanese Business Federation. Gorou-sensei was always committing debauchery, and never paid heed to his family, so Alice was more willing to accept him, I guess? When Alice left hom, she had no one to rely on except for Gorou-sensei.”

However, Gorou-sensei wasn't in Japan at that time, so he could only contact his number 1 disciple and leave Alice to him. Hiro here then left Alice to the most reliable of the friends—in other words Min-san. They're just passing the buck! What taking care? Those two are gigolos though, so thye probably would only be serious towards those they pursue, I guess. Alice's too young, and sensei's relative.

“Speaking of whic, why did he show up again?”

“Right, he said he was going to visit Min-san or something.”

Hiro's face showed a drastic case, as though he swallowed an eel whole.

“...Really? Sensei, probably doesn't know Min-san, right? This is bad. I have a bad feeling about this. If possible, I really don't want them to meet...”

Hiro's wariness was clear to see, and it was one wary of another man. In Hiro's position, Min-san was the woman he loved, yet sensei was the woman killer he couldn't match up to.

No no, he's probably thinking too much.”

“You're thinking too much.”

“Wah!”

I stood up, and turned around. Gorou-sensei opened the office door without me knowing, and was standing behind us. Behind the round lenses of the glasses were a pair of soft, narrow eyes.

“Sensei! It's been a while!”

Hiro stood up, and gave a deep bow. Gorou-sensei reached his little hand out, and grabbed Hiro's hair.

“Hiro-bou, you look really energetic there. So, how about it? How many women did you make happy after I left?”

Hiro lifted his head slightly, and looked slightly ashamed as he answered,

“None at the moment. I'm not working hard enough.”

Sensei showed a gentle smile, and nodded.

“Very good. That's good. I'm here to expel you, Hiro-bou.”

“...Eh?”

I widened my eyes as I looked at sensei's face.

“I heard from a few ladies that you found the fated woman for yourself? You're unable to continue freeloading off them anymore. I do find it a pity to end this skill in my generation...but I'm expelling you.”

However, Gorou-sensei immediately retracted his words. As we were walking down the emergency staircase, Min-san poked her head out from the back door of the kitchen. It was already mid autumn, and the bare shoulders looked so bright. As usual, she was in her tank top.

“I heard a customer's looking for me? Who?”

Upon seeing Min-san, sensei slammed a fist at Hiro's chest, muttering,

“I'll take back what I said about expelling you.”

Hiro's expression had been so gloomy till this point, but now, he's so shocked and stunned.

“You're able to find such a fine woman for yourself. Now you're no longer expelled, but 'graduated'.”

Soon after, Tetsu-senpai and Major showed up at 'Hanamaru', surrounding sensei as they began drinking. As Hiro's master, it seemed he was acquianted with the members of the NEET detective agency.

“Sensei, didn't you say you're going to stay in Monaco often? And woo an actress there?” Tetsu-senpai asked as he raised a glass full of beer.

“I couldn't get used to living there! I got the feeling that I'll fall into the sea whenever I sleep. I had no choice, so I had two girls sleeping by my sides, and they got angry.”

I didn't know if what he said was real...Min-san in the kitchen too looked on in frustration.

However, sensei didn't take a sip of beer, didn't eat any ramen or dumplings, and didn't take a sip of water. Furthermore, he went to the bathroom often, and I could hear some faint coughing. These really concerned me.

It was until sunset, when the other customers started to enter the shop, that sensei got up and took his coat and cap.

“Now then, having met some people I haven't met in a while, I shall take my leave.”

For some reason, sensei was staring at me as he said this. The eyes behind the round lenses were blazing, as though they were trying to say something to me, and also saying, You don't have to take my hint.

“Ah, I'll send you to the station then.” I said as I took my duffle coat. Of course,

Hiro did the same.

The day in November was short, and the dark blue hue of the night was already dangling down low, while the lights of the buildings and the passing car lights shone coldly upon the night. I took the front end of my coat, walking behind sensei and Hiro who were walking side by side. Looking from behind, those gigolos looked like father and son.

“Where are you staying now, sensei?” Hiro asked.

“I'll be staying in Tokyo for the time being. There are a few things I have to settle.”

“I see. If you're free, please drop by. I'm a disobedient disciple who got expelled though.”

Hiro actually admitted that he was expelled. Sensei and I stared at him.

“Have you made up your mind?” Sensei asked.

Have you decided to settle down? That was the implication.

“Yes.” Hiro nodded.

Sensei slowed down, and said each word with emphasis.

“When I first met you, Hiro-bou, I saw your eyes, and I really believed that you will inherit my mantle...People do change with their surroundings. I'm elated, and yet a little disappointed.”

“In fact, he's still living at other girls' houses. He hasn't changed at all.”

“No, I can tell. Hiro-bou has a different sprout in his garden, and won't grow roses of Don Juan again.”

We walked along the railroads, towards the bustling streets. Right when we arrived at the Homeless Park[11], sensei finally turned back to look at me.

“Oh yes, young man, I forgot to ask your name, I believe?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. Fujishima. Fujishima Narumi”

“Yuuko's partner?”

“...Eh, yeah.” I'm the detective's assistant. It wouldn't be out of line to be

called her partner.

“IS there something you want to ask me?”

It appeared my attitude and eyes betrayed what I was thinking.

“Erm, well...I do, actually...”

“It's about Yuuko, right? That girl will grow up to be prettier, and complicated.”

“No, I do want to know about Alice, but I don't intend to ask for the time being. If there's something I should know, I guess that she'll tell me herself. Or else, anything I ask will just anger her.”

“Hm.”

In that case, what did I want to know by tailing them?

This old man, Gorou-sensei really interest me.

I decided to ask,

“Erm, when you came to this shop, you spoke to Ayaka, didn't you?”

“She's a nice girl. I'm envious of you, young man.”

“But before talking to her, you, well, quickly removed the flower on her shoulder and put it on her hair, right? Eh, I'm not scolding you, but, I don't know the meaning behind that.”

Gorou-sensei widened his eyes, and was silent for a moment. Beside us, Hiro looked back and forth between sensei and me in surprise.

Finally, Gorou-sensei reached his hands out, and patted me twice on the shoulders.

“A basic to the art of a gigolo is to control the human distance.”

“...Haa.” Why tell me that?'

“It's a method to 'remove the paranoia'. There's a most fragile place by the human neck, and if you can touch that place accurately, you can remove the distance between people in a short time.”

I was really overwhelmed by him, and couldn't help but look at Hiro, *what's*

this sensei saying now? Hiro however narrowed his eyes at me, probably looking at something stinging.

I'll be back sensei told us, and vanished in the crwd at the east entrance of the train station. We watched him leave from behind, and Hiro suddenly looked up at the Winter sky, muttering,

“You really do have talent, Narumi. To be expected of sensei to figure it out on the first meeting.”

Oi, what are you saying?

And starting from the next day, Gorou-sensei would often show up at 'Hanamaru'.

“Hiro isn't here today...”

“It's fine, young Fujishima, I'm here to see you.”

Sensei said as he went to the gathering place outside the back door of the kitchen, and we talked our hearts out until the sun set. Min-san stared at me, and Ayaka too looked confused as she watched me, but the conversation with Gorou-sensei was really too interesting that I was mesmerized. For example—

“Boy, are you good at maths?”

“No, not really?”

“But this is a basic concept in geometry. If you specify a flat surface in a 3 dimensional space, how many vertices do you need at least?”

“3, I guess?'

“Yes. This is an understanding that a gigolo has to have at least 3 women.”

That line was such a classic I couldn't retort at that. And also, there was this conversation as example,

“When loving many women at the same time, where they are, and where they're facing will all be different. When you approach you, you'll definitely be distant from another. Try getting one to turn around, and others will turn away. Boy, in that case, what do you do?”

“Well...” it felt like a question on Zen. “Stand in the middle and yell to get around to come close, is it?”

“That's incorrent. Unfortunately, everyone has their own lives, and they can't change that easily. The correct answer is...” Gorou-sensei pointed his middle finger to nudge his round glasses, and then pointed to the gentle November sun behind between the buildings.

“Get as high up as possible, and be as bright as possible. Then all the stares will gather, and you'll be able to share your light with everyone.”

There was once when Hiro took listened to sensei's words, and when sensei went to the toilet, he lamented,

“He never went that in-depth when he first taught me...”

No, erm, that should be just some speaking training, right?

“Listen, boy, a gigolo relies on women to support him, and not leave a single cent. There is a reason to that. Do you understand?”

“I don't want to understand. Erm, it's just because you don't want to work?”

“Wrong again. The art of Gigolo is a work that takes a lot of brainpower. You need to show care for her at all times, sense her heart, prepare beforehand,

choose the right choice of words, and also seize the opportune timing to talk. Seeing Hiro-bou, you do often think 'in that case, why didn't he just go to work?' don't you?”

Well, it's not just twice or thrice, at least.

“The reason why we don't give the ladies a single cent is because, if we give a tangible, or calculatable item, there will be unfairness. There's a need to love every woman equally, and by devoting everything to every single world, you can treat every lady fairly as an invaluable one. That's why you can't give a single cent, and only accept their money. Remember this well.”

I don't want to. This really is something only a lowlife will do. Hiro, why did you learn from this guy? This isn't something to be respected.

However, Gorou-sensei really was a sharp one.

“Young Fujishima, you have an older sister, but your other family members aren't with you, right? You don't appear to be capable of talking well, but you're actually adept at handling them.”

“Eh? H-how did you know?'

“You occasionally receive calls at night, and observing you, it's not hard to figure it out.”

Well, it's true. Only when my sister calls me will I answer *I'll be back late* or *I don't need dinner*.

“That's why you need to observe carefully. Also, absorb the information. The most important thing is to find joy in it. For a gigolo, that's the most important thing.”

“Ah, erm, please wait, sensei. Why do you want to make me a gigolo?”

“I never thought I'll find a boy with much more talent than Hiro-bou did in my old age, and I want to treasure this miracle. I'm already 62. You're likely to become my last disciple.”

“I guessed so. I thought you'll be good at wooing women, Narumi.” “But Vice-Admiral Fujishima has no awareness at all, and is more terrifying at this then Hiro.” “When did you guys show up!?”

Tetsu-senpai and Major popped by without me knowing, and sat down beside Hiro to listen to sensei's teachings. Sensei suddenly posed a question to the audience.

“Besides Yuuko, there are a lot of fine women around this boy, right?

“You three are already counting with your fingers?”

“I don't know whether this or that counts?”

“I know 8 of them.”

“On my calculations, about 25 of them.” How did you count them?'

“Edison once said this.” Gorou-sensei said, “A gigolo is 99% of hard work and 1% of luck with women.”

Who said such nonsense before? Wasn't Edison an inventor?

Suddenly, a woman's voice could be heard from outside the shop, interrupting Gorou-sensei's lesson.”

“Sorry to bother, did my father come to visit...?”

Gorou-sensei suddenly went silent, grabbed his coat, put on his cap, and stood up. Between the buildings were Min-san and someone else.

“Old man, she said she's here to take you back.” Min-san said.

“Sorry that my dad caused such trouble.”

The lady in front of us bowed deeply. She was dressed in a black peacoat, a beige wool skirt, and had long fur boots on, dressed up like a college girl. She looked really cute. Gorou-sensei's daughter?

“Sensei...you have a kid?”

Hiro's tone showed no signs of hiding his shock.

“Um, yeah. I'll introduce. She's Akiko.”

Sensei introduced in a rather gaudy manner.

“I'm Shionji Akiko. Sorry to have you...take care of my father all this time...”

Akiko-san continued to apologize to us profusely, *we'll take our leave them,* and saying that, held sensei by the arm and left.

“I never expected sensei to have a kid.”

Hiro muttered as he frowned, tilting his head the entire time.

“He has so many girlfriends, so, I don't think it's strange to have a kid on accident, right?'

“But sensei had always taught me this beforehand. The number one rule of being a gigolo is to avoid pregnancy at all times. Once she gives birth, I'll have to prioritize that woman for the rest of my life.”

I see. While this reasoning would definitely have everyone viewing him as a public enemy of ladies, but I could understand what they were trying to convey, and I inadvertently nodded. At this moment, Min-san suddenly glanced aside

and glared at me.

“Hey! You're not planning to actually listen to that old man's words, are you?”

“No no, how can you say that?'

“”You can try! But if you make Alice cry, I'm going to beat you to near death.”

“No, wait, Min-san. The path of being a gigolo exists to prevent women from crying.”

“Shut up, Hiro! Have you reflected on your actions? I'm still ffurious!”

Min-san grabbed Hiro by the back of the collar, and dragged him into the kitchen. During the commotion over that arranged marriage, Hiro went straight to the point and proposed to Min-san, but that was the result due to him fooling around with other women too (despite the plan being thought up by me), so it seemed Min-san was still angry about it. I really made up my mind never to become someone like Hiro.

And besides, I didn't know what she meant by making Alice cry. Even if I really stray away from the path of a detective's assistant and become a gigolo, she'll probably be either shocked or angry, right?

“Both! I'll be shocked AND angry! Do you get it!?”

When I entered the office and served dinner, I mentioned to Alice what just happened. In the end, Alice was so furious, her hair was shivering.

“Shionji Gorou's a lowlife amongst all lowlives, the enemy of half of humanity! That kind of skill should have been buried in darkness forever, and you want to inherit it!?”

“Relax, the talk about me being the disciple's just a joke, you know? Hiro's the real disciple, and you didn't say anything about him. I just listened to what he said anyway. Why are you being so clingy?”

“B-because you're my.”

Midway through, Alice was already grabbing the side of the bed, utterly furious.

“Assistant, right? I know that! If the assistant's just going around wooing ladies and not doing his job, you'll be really bothered, right? That'll affect the reputation of the office, and the female clients won't come by...”

'You don't understand! That's not what I'm worried about!”

“Eh? Then what?'

“Whatever.”

Alice suddenly turned her face towards the screen, her petite body completely covered under the rich hair.

“...You don't like Gorou-sensei?'

I placed the ramen on the table, and cautious asked her this.

“That's not it.”

With her back still turned on me, Alice answered in a somewhat displeased manner.

“In some sense, I really do respect him, and also grateful to him. Amongst all the Shionjis, great uncle Gorou's the only one I feel fine to meet.”

I slowly retreated to the entrance of the room, and silently stood there, waiting for Alice to say anything. I felt that she might tell me some things about the Shionjis.

And Alice seemed to have read my thoughts, for she turned her head slightly towards me, saying,

“But right now, I have nothing to say to you...”

Those words, coupled with an unexpected gentleness in her tone, delighted me suddenly. I waited for her to finish the food in the bowl, and took the tray out of the office.

I saw the white presence of the moon shining upon the city, merged into the night.

When Alice said *I don't have anything to say now*, it meant there might be a chance she would tell me. Keeping this possibility alone allowed me to feel my raison d'etre.

After that, Gorou-sensei's lessons continued during various days. Whenever the sun set, that Akiko-san would definitely come by to bring sensei home, and when the weather's cold, I could see sensei learning on Akiko-san, getting onto the taxi with much effort. The back of this ailing old man realy was discomforting.

Sometimes, sensei never came by to 'Hanamaru', but once the sky got dark, Akiko-san would still come by to look for him. Thus, I seized the opportunity to ask.

“Is sensei feeling unwell?”

“He's been coughing often, hasn't he?” beside me, Tetsu-senpai asked.

“He wouldn't eat anything, wouldn't drink anything. It's worrying.” Major too was frowning. With a grim look, Akiko-san nodded.

“E-ehh...it's true that his organs, aren't good...but he's been wandering around every day, and wouldn't contact me. Erm, it's a little too much coming from me, but I'll like to ask something of you, Fujishima-san.”

Akiko-san took out a small white bag from her handbag. A packet of medication.

“Dad should be taking this every day, but he hates eating it, and often lef thome while leaving the medication behind. If he comes by, can you please have him take his medicine?”

“Me? Well, he does come by every day...but isn't it more appropriate to leave it to Min-san?'

“No, I guess a woman probably won't be able to get my dad to listen up...”

Hmm, that's right.

“My dad seems to be fond of you. If you have him take his medication, I guess he'll listen.”

Since she said, it was hard for me to refuse.

The packet had drug tablets packaged together, with the word '妈富隆'[12]

written on the prescription sheet. It's probably some Chinese medicine, I guess? Each pill had a date every week written by the side, probably to remind him not to forget?

However, the medicine left with me was of no use. Entering the last week of November, sensei never showed up at 'Hanamaru' again.

“Wonder how that old man's doing? Hiro, do you have his phone number?”

Even Min-san's starting to worry. Really, that man had some inexplicable charisma to him.

“Sensei said that as a gigolo, he wouldn't just give his contact to others, so he wouldn't tell me at all.”

Hiro said as he shrugged.

I sat down at the emergency staircase, looked up at the gloomy sky between the buildings, filled with the presence of winter, and looked down at my hand again. The medicine package was of no use at all. Sensei suddenly vanished without contacting us.

I glanced aside at Hiro, and found that he too was thinking of the same thing as me. If only we had Akiko-san's contact before this...

No, he probably was just busy going out with other girls, right? He's been coughing often, but he didn't look too bad, and he was in his early sixties yet about to be so sharp in his words. Those were what I kept telling myself, but while my mind thought this, my heart had an ominous premonition. He suddenly came by to visit a former disciple, was hastily seeking a successor, and was so worried that his skills would die out...

Having painfully experienced this many times, my premonition was most precise at its worst.

It was late November when Akiko-san personally came to 'Hanamaru' to deliver sensei's obituary. The sky looked aas though it was about to snow, and it mad Akiko-san, dressed in black, all the more gloomy. She was dressed in a thick coat,

black tights and long boots. It was an ordinary outfit, yet so resembling mourning clothes.

Sensei's will was that he didn't want the women he loved so much cry in front of him, so only Akiko-san attended his funeral. That was 3 days ago.

“Thank you for taking care of my dad while he was still alive.”

Hiro and I, and even Min-san bowed down to Akiko-san.

“Dad has been happy ever since he came by often...”

Hiro and I were seated side by side at the counter, and we're speechless. Min-san, standing in the kitchen behind us, remained silent for a long time.

Min-san silently took out the most expensive wine in the shop, and Hiro and Akiko-san were seated side by side at the counter as they toasted with grim looks. I too went along with them, but with oolong tea instead.

For some reason, i didn't feel sad at all. Sensei probably knew that he would die, and Akiko-san, who should be the saddest amongst us, merely looked lost, as though her tears dried out.

—Listen, young Fujishima...

Sensei's hyperboles appeared in my mind one by one.

—You need to have at least three women around you.

—Never ever approach a woman on your own volition. Smile at them from high up.

—Never give a single cent. Only take from now.

While he continued to teach me as though it was nothing, did he hear the countdown ticking in his body the entire time?

Suddenly, Hiro looked up at the sky in an exaggerated manner.

“...That guy's probably wooing Marilyn Monroe or Jean Harlow right now, right?'

I suppose this would be the most apt line to describe Gorou-sensei's death. As expected, Hiro's his prized disciple, and I'm lesser than a page at this point, though I had no intention of being his disciple, I think.

However, Akiko-san slowly finished the wine in her cup, and suddenly turned towards me.

“There is something I'll request of you, Fujishima-san. This is my dad's will.”

“...Y-yes?'

“He once said that he hope for you to deliver his belongings.”

Stunned, I was at a loss of words, and could only look at Hiro and back at Akiko-san. I deliver? Why me and not say, Hiro? Did he really pick me as the successor? Did he not say those words for fun?

“This is it. He said that you'll understand his intentions if I hand this to you...”

Akiko-san took out a large case with purple flannel from the paper bag at her feet, and placed it on my lap. I opened it, and the glitter of platinum was so bright, I couldn't open my eyes. The glamorous, delicately crafted necktie pins lined up. They were of eaxt sizes, and had Turkish stones. I counted, and there were 14 of them.

“...Why, so many off the same?”

“Dad only said that you'll understand his intentions, Fujishima-san, and deliver these accordingly...”

“E-erm, to whom though? Hiro has one, of course, right? And then there's Tetsu-senpai and Major, right? But there are too many of them. I don't know who's with sensei...”

“I'm not too sure either. Dad has a lot of friends everywhere.”

Leaving this job to me's really troublesome. She said it's sensei's will, and I couldn't just refuse.

I continued to stare at the jewel case in front of me, even after Akiko-san left. Hiro took a necktie pin, flipped it around, and observed quietly.

“Look, the jewellery's detachable, and can be used as a brooth or a pendant. This probably is to be sent to many of them...for women to use, I guess?”

“Anyway, take one, Hiro. This is troublesome. Who do we deliver this to?”

Min-san interrupted from the side.

“Won't you know if you ask Alice? They're relatives.”

I see. I nodded. But would Alice tell me that? I couldn't ask.

“Maybe it's not for me either. I never heard sensei mention this.”

Hiro put the necktie pin back into the case.

“Maybe someone will come for it?”

And so, Hiro's prediction came true in the worst way possible. The next day, 'Hanamaru' was bombarded with phone calls all day along.

“Yes...ehh, this is 'Hanamaru'...eh? Gorou? Gorou, as in that old man? Ah I know him, oi, it's me. Hello1 Listen to me! I have nothing to do with him! Fujishima? Ah, you're calling for Narumi? I'll call for him, so quiet! Narumi! Hey! Narumi!”

Hearing Min-san's yell, I hurried through the back door of the kitchen and into the corridor. Min-san shoved the receiver into my hands, and from the receiver, I could hear a woman's sobbing.

”G-Gorou-chan...I heard about him...yes, I know...I don't have the right to send him off...and...his, erm, daughter...uuu...he has a daughter...so I wish to have some of his inheritance...eh, yes, yes, at least...ahh, uuu.”

“E-erm...”

I could barely hear what was going on, but the lady who called was unable to speak properly, and was wailing again, so I could only ask her to calm down and call again later before hanging up. What's going on?

However, this didn't end. Every 15 minutes, there was a call to Min-san's house, and I was again loudly called out to pick up the phone and forced to comfort the weeping ladies.

“Gorou-sensei, it-it's impossible! Since he's back in Tokyo, u-uu, he could have called fore he died!”

“Papa Gorou died, what? Hey, is this a lie? When he went to Gram with me the last time before he died, he was looking really energetic! You're lying! Tell

me that's a lieeeee!!”

“Yes, yes, I understand now...Gorou-san's a woodpecker, and I'm just a rotting wood. But, yes, at the very least, I wish to say something...leave a message for me...yes? Yes, I heard about the inheritance...”

After a few phone calls, Min-san's angry breath seemed to have taken form as the steam in the kitchen, and I could sit down obediently in front of the phone. Most of the women were so agitated, they were unintelligible in their words, and I could only get them to calm down before calling again, before hanging up the phone. As for those I could get through him, I had them record down a possible contact, make arrangements, and call back later on. I kept receiving calls until midnight, and was not only fatigue, but my phone log had phone numbers of all the deceased's lovers.

What am I doing...

I returned home, and tried sorting out all the names and calls. There were 13 of them. Seriously, that old man's able to get a double digit number of girlfriends even when he's at that age? I took out the purple box placed by my side, and resisted the urge to throw it out of the window before opening it.

There were definitely 13 necktie pins—no, 14 of them. There's still one more. Will someone else call?

I recalled the women who called one by one, and found a peculiar issue.

Everyone said that they received contact from Gorou-sensei, and called 'Hanamaru'. Wasn't that strange? Akiko-san said that she didn't know who to deliver the inheritance to, right? Did she receive so many of the lovers' calls that she left it to 'Hanamaru'...or was Akiko-san lying? For what? She had no reason to lie? Something's fishy, and I was curious.

I took out the necktie pins and laid them out of the table, inspecting them one by one. They were all the same. Right when I was about to plut them back into the box, I noticed something.

The inside of the box was dented.

I gently took the cardboard covered in flannel, and found a stack of paper underneath. It was a purchase order. The platinum necktie and the Turkish

stones were bought at the same store, but by different people. 'Ah', I exclaimed, and picked up Gorou-sensei's lover list to compare. 13 lists altogether, with 13 names, exactly the same.

What inheritance is this...they're basically the presents from his lovers! Does he want to return these presents he received when he was alive? Will they be happy? And why did they all have the same thing?

At this moment, a few words sensei said echoed in my mind—

I suddenly understood.

To be honest, I really didn't want to understand, and neither did I ever want it to be discovered. Despite this, I could understand why Gorou-sensei left the necktie pins to me, and what he intended for me to do.

I looked up at the ceiling, and again stared at the dazzling Turkish stones, before looking back at the gloomy scenery outside the winddow, and sighed. I took out my cellphone, hoping to settle this within a day, and had to carefully arrange the schedule. This was the first time in my life that I was so serious in making phone calls, and I hoped it would be the last. For a 17-year-old high school boy, 13 lovers were a huge burdern.

Winter appeared to be around the corner on this bright, cloudless sunny Sunday . 9am in the morning, I was cycling towards the detective agency.

“Why do I have to do this with you?”

Alice was very unhappy, but she put on her mourning clothes. I didn't say this as it really wasn't much of a praise, but Alice was really suited for wearing mourning clothes.

“You're Gorou-sensei's relative, Alice. Of course you have a reason to meet them.”

I answered. Actually, I knew very well it was just an excuse, and Alice certainly must have seen through my thoughts.

“You feel that it'll be awkward for you to talk with the women you don't know alone, right? Are you banking on me to recap great uncle Gorou's life to fill in the

moments when you can't talk?'

No, everything's as you said.

“The important thing is that I hope you'll stay by my side.”

“M, mmmmm.”

Alice pulled her veil down to hide her blushing cheeks, and hid behind the plushies. It seemed she misunderstood in some strange way again.

“In other words, I'll be speaking for the dead for the first time, so I want you, the professional Alice, to watch. This is my request as your subordinate.”

I too wore a black suit and tie I borrowed, the official outfit of the NEET detectives.

“What speaker of the dead? You didn't figure out the most important part.”

“...Eh?”

“Whatever. Looks like the first one's already here. Pick up the tie pin now.”

It's true that there was a woman in mourning cclothes shown on a corner of the surveillance camera, coming through the front door of the building we hardly went by. I hurriedly adjusted my black necktie, and put on the Turkish stone necktie pin.

The doorbell rang.

I opened the office door, and on the corridor was a woman about 40 years old, giving off a radiant presesnce. Hiro led the lady up, and was standing beside her, telling her, please go in.

“I'm Fujishima, who spoke with you on the phone. Thank you for taking your time to come bay today...”

I lowered my head towards her as apology, and welcomed her in.

Soon after, I regretted choosing the NEET detective agency as the venue to deliver the inheritance. It was already Winter, and the air conditioning was switched on, so I had to apologize to her. We entered, and she stopped in shock due to the monitors in the room, so I had to calm her down. When I introduced Gorou-sensei's great niece Alice, she went “Well, so cute...resembles Gorou-

sensei there...” and tried to hug Alice, so I had to split them up. Realizing that I might have to repeat the process another dozen times, I had a fainting sensation.

It was only when the visiting lady sat on the cushion opposite me did she realize,

“That necktie pin.”

“Yes.” I put my hand on my chest. “This is the present you gave Gorou-sensei, right? He told me this. The birthday stone he received on the birthday in ecember...”

“Yes, yes...that's right.”

The lady nodded with tears in her eyes. I felt Alice's icy glare on my back, and my organs were in a knot due to the guilt. At this point, there was no turning back. I took out the purple flannel, and laid it out in front of the lady.

It was the same platinum ornament and Turkish stone as the one on my chest —except the pin was removed and the brooch remained.

Wasn't it too much? The moment before I spoke up, this thought nearly tore my heart apart. However, I did my best to say those words.

“Sensei bought the same ornanment in the same shop, and wanted to give it to you. There's a purchase invoice, so I'm guessing it was for you. Gorou-sensei was often taken care of by the ladies, but never repaid them. However, for you, and you alone, well.”

The lady in front of me reached her trembling hands out for the brooch, and bent over to weep.

I looked up at the sky, and for the first time since I was born, I wanted to repent to God.

This Fujishima Narumi was often accused of being a con artist ever since he got involved with the NEETs. However, I can't deny anything this time. I'm sorry.

Right when I was wondering what I should do so as not to make this woman cry, something terrifying happened. The conversation skills Gorou-sensei taught me awoke in my mind.

“Gorou-sensei always said that he has nothing, and doesn't know anything other than to love, so all he can only do was to smile back when he receives. Please do the same for him.”

Even I was terrified that those words came out from my mouth. I finally escorted the woman, who stopped weeping, to the door, and handed her over to Hiro. Hiro's job was very important. He's in charge of getting the visiting ladies to leave quickly through the emergency staircase. Of course, all this was to prevent her from meeting the next lady coming through the front door.

“I never thought you would say such chilling lies with a straight face. And you said the same lines 30 times.”

After delivering the 13 gifts, I laid sprawled on the floor, worn out. Alice stood in front of me, speaking to me with a reluctant tone.

“If you intend to spend the rest of your life to repent to God, I'll be glad to recommend you a monastery.”

“Sorry. I thought of becoming a monk myself. Stop scolding me...”

Suddenly, the door could be heard being opened, and some slow footsteps approached. Finally, Hiro's voice rained down on me.

“You're amazing, Narumi! To be expected of how Gorou-sensei viewed you favorably. Even I couldn't think of such shameless words.”

“I had no choice!”

I sat up, and slammed the floor. The guilt and self-reproaching echoed in my heart, finally becoming anger.

“What else do you want me to do? If I said the truth, that'll just hurt them more!”

“You see! The thinking to 'lie to women rather than make them cry' is something Gorou-sensei taught. He definitely knew you'll be able to do it, and that's why he left the mission to you, right?”

Again, I collapsed on the floor.

“Don't give women a single cent, and not make them cry. Humph. That's what great uncle would think. Looks like I have to reconsider my assistant. I never thought you'll be this indecent.” Alice continued to berate me.

I kept telling Gorou-sensei's lovers that 'this is bought just for you', 'he intended to give this to you alone', but the sweet talk was all a lie. Gorou-sensei insisted on his own beliefs, never to spend anything on a single woman. The brooches given to all his lovers were all given to him by his other lovers. The reason why he wanted everyone to buy the same one was probably to avoid a tragedy of being spotted wearing a gift from the other women, right? Of course, none of the 13 women realized that there were exactly the same gifts given to him by others, and that's why my bluffing worked.

Gorou-sensei provided a wonderful memory to all the lovers without spending a single cent, and left the stage. For that purpose, he used this last disciple that's me for this brilliance.

“Oh yeah, there's 14 of them. The last one should be for Narumi, right? Shall I praise you for being a one of a kind gigolo?”

I guess? Actually, that's what I thought.

At this moment, Alice suddenly rushed off the bed, grabbed my shoulder, rolled me over on the floor, and grabbed my necktie pin.

“—Wh-what? You want this, Alice?”

“Enough with the nonsense!. Return it to its proper owner.”

“Proper owner? Who?”

“Who else? Great uncle Gorou's wife!”

“Sensei's wife? He has one? Ahh, Akiko-san's mother, right? Oh yeah, I forgot.”

“Seriously, have you not realized? You're so stupid it's amazing. Even when the day of the Final Judgment arrives, I bet you'll be stupidly checking the mailbox, wondering why the newspaper hasn't arrived.

“Eh?” I don't understand. Erm, what didn't I realize?

“That woman called Akiko is great uncle Gorou's wife.”

“Ehhhhh!?”

All my fatigue was instantly blown afar. I immediately nudged my body over to Alice.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“That's what I mean. Great uncle Gorou's still alive!”

I was shocked, so stunned, my mouth was wide open.

“What kind of prank is this to play dead and get someone else to deliver the inheritance? He's just trying to wash his hands off and draw a line from all his lovers while he continues with his monkey show?”

“...How did you figure it out, Alice?” Hiro seemed to have some sense left, so he asked in my stead,

“Narumi, you received some medicine from Shionji Akiko, and she told you that it's the medicine he has to take, right?”

“Eh? Ah, ahh, yeah.”

Gorou-sensei wouldn't take medication often as he hated taking it, so Akiko-san requested me to remind him to take it when he came to 'Hanamaru'. I didn't have the chance, and didn't get to meet sensei again.

“Think back to what was written on the packaging of the medicine.”

“Eh? Erm, well, looks like it's some Chinese medcine. There are three Chinese words I couldn't read...erm.”

I fumbled through the pocket of my duffle coat, and took out the medicine. '妈富隆'. Alice spotted the three words through the black veil, and snorted.

“That's read as 'Marvelon'. **A contraceptive drug**.”

My jaw dropped once again.

What? A contraceptive drug? Why would Gorou-sensei take it?

“I stated it so clearly, and you still don't understand? That woman and great uncle Gorou teamed up to lie to you. They said he's sick, need to take medicine every day. That conceptive drug is something Shionji Akiko takes every day, right? The week's dates were printed on it, and the instructions were written in

Chinese you don't understand. That's what they used to fool you two.”

“...Everything, was a lie? Eh...then...his incessant coughing was faked?”

“Of course it was faked! He pretended that he wasn't feeling well, had the fake medicine at your place; all that was for the sake of making you guys think he's dead.”

It was because we believed—that the 13 lovers who came to visit sensed the heavy atmosphere, and believed—

They believed that the unrivalled lover hunter, Shionji Gorou died.

I weakly lowered my head and stared at the medicine package in my hands. Contraceptives. Hiro's words again appeared in my mind. First rule of being a gigolo, avoid pregnancy.

Gorou-sensei couldn't possibly have any children.

In that case, the woman with the same family name was—

“You should have realized when you saw the 14 necktie pins, right!?”

Alice gave an impatient look as she stabbed her index finger at my chest.

“Great uncle Gorou can't possibly spend a single cent on a woman, so in other words, there were 14 women who sent him the necktie pin. Of course, the 14th is that Shionji Akiko!

And she continued stabbing her index finger at my chest.

“So return the last one to that woman right now! He lied to my assistnat, and decided for himself that my assistant will be the successor to being such a wretched gigolo. Totally unforgivable!”

Alice threw the necktie pin to Hiro.

“I already tracked down where those two are through the GPS. They're currently at a hotel in Ueno, and booked a flight for Australia tomorrow. I'll send the address to your phone. So return it to them now!”

“Me?”

“Who else? I won't let Narumi meet him again. I don't want that kind of man to be near Narumi again!”

Until Hiro left the office, I was basked in the emptiness of the strong cold breeze of the air conditioning. I simply felt that there were hundreds of mice jumping around in my mind, toppling everything I had stacked up all over the floor.

But despite this, I barely managed to understand the entire situation.

In other words, Gorou-sensei chose the 'only one' that was Akiko-san. In a certain sense, he, as a gigolo, died.

However, his heart that treasured women never died. He wasn't willing to go against his belief of 'not making women cry', and didn't wish for the art of wooing ladies to die off.

Perhaps he originally intended for Hiro to deliver his inheritance? Besides, Hiro was once his disciple whom he suffered with, and if he was honest and came up witht he plan to fool the lovers, Hiro would most likely cooperate. Otherwise, hoping that Hiro would realize his intentions by delivering the pins was way too risky.

However, Gorou-sensei met me, Fujishima Narumi, at 'Hanamaru'.

So this act of delivering the inheritance was a test he gave me?

“Alice...since Gorou-sensei's still alive, why didn't you tell me that right from the beginning?”

I asked with a feeble voice. The figure in mourning clothes was already back on the bed, facing the screen again.

“If I told you from the beginning, the lovers might figure it out! I want them to believe and go back, or else they'll idle around in the office and make a ruckus. That'll cause trouble for me too.”

“Ah, yeah, I see.”

“But I never thought that you could say out such blatant lies. Looks like great uncle taught you well! You honed your conman skills so well, so identical to him, it's disgusting.”

“Sorry...”

I exhalted the heavy breath that gathered in my chest onto the floor, and remove my tie.

“I didn't intend to actually learn, and I thought it was fine to just listen...but the way Gorou-sensei talks really made me want to remember his words. It's like there's some magic.”

“Forgot about it all right now. I don't want to hire an assistant that's some rotting leftovers.”

Such harsh words. But, well. Even without Alice telling me that, I'll slowly forget, right? It's some useless knowledge I'll never ever use in my life. The one I found most useful was the '25 dearest lines that'll definitely make someone happy', but these were only effective to women, and I probably won't need it...

“Mm, hmm? You forgot those too?” Alice suddenly turned back.

“What? I can't?'

“N-no, just out of curiosity. Those words that'll definitely delight people, what are they, for example?”

“Well, 'I'm not sure if I'll definitely make you happy, but as long as we're together, I believe that I'm definitely happy'.”

Alice began to blush, even on her ears, and she collapsed onto the bed. The hill of plushies fell on her, and they scattered onto the floor. Wait...this is just a ripoff linefrom the manga 'Tsuribaka Nisshi'[13], right? Gorou-sensei likes to quote others.

“U-uu, and then?” Alice again lifted her head. I couldn't see clearly through the veil, but it seemed her face was still a little red. Why continue asking?

“I guess, and... 'I'm always thinking of what to say when I meet you. But when I see you, I'm so happy that I forget everything...'.”

And this time, Alice herself fell down between the bed and the racks.

“Narumi! Y-you shameless idiot!”

“Aren't you the one who told me to say that? And I don't normally say those words!”

Just saying these words alone is embarrasssing!

Alice continued rolling around like yudedako[14], but she insisted on me to finish the 25 lines for some strange reason. What kind of punishment game is this? Please spare me already.

At the end of the year, I received a postcard from Gorou-sensei.

Of course, he didn't know my address, so he had it sent directly to 'Hanamaru'. Because of this, Min-san, Tetsu-senpai, Major, and even Hiro saw the postcard with the scenery and the words 'passed. You have succeeded me'.

“You guys might as well open a gigolo tuition center. Gather a whole bunch of scumbags, and it'll be easier for the police to prosecute.”

Min-san didn't really sound like she was joking.

“Alright! To celebrate Narumi succeeding the line, let's roll some dice.”

Tetsu-senpai cheerfully took out a bowl and som dice.

“Since we're celeberating Narumi becoming a gigolo, let's set a rule that rolling 4-5-6 will mean a big treat!”

Major too joined in excitedly.

“So rolling 2-5-6 [15]will mean 10 times the earnings!”

Wait, why's Hiro joining in too?

“Dealer this time will be Narumi, of course! Get rolling! We'll start with the usual max.”

But on the first roll, as if it was to be expected, I rolled a 4-5-6. The trio squealed, took out 10,000 yen notes and threw them at me. All I felt was fate being sarcastic to me.

As for Alice, of course, I never showed her the postcard. If she was to see the content, I wouldn't know how much she would nag at me. Even so, I had no intention of destroying the postcard, so it remained nailed in a corner of my room's wall with thumbtacks.

On every chilly night, I would occasionally think of Gorou-sensei.

I would lift my legs onto the table, lean back on the chair backrest, and look up to see the photo on the postcard. It's a distant scenery of the seaside at night, with a few rows of footsteps carved on the beach blown neatly by the winds. At the far end of the photo was a vague white figure, and when I looked closey at it, I would find that it's a white wedding veil flying due to the sea breeze.

There were a few things at the bride'sfeet.

A white morning coat that was taken off, a bouque that was scattered all over, boots that were overturned, and round glasses buried in the scene.

Whenever I saw this scene, I inadvertently smile.

This too should be an act too, right? He gave me a final lesson, for me to understand that a gigolo should be like this, and for that purpose, had Akiko-san involve to take a photo of such a lame joke, right? I had this thought, but I couldn't stop thinking that he really ran away from the wedding. That man might really do that after all.

Whenever I looked away from the photo and out of the winow, I would suddenly have an image of Gorou-sensei in his underwear, running away on the beach. He jumped onto an old open car, race down the seaside road, down past the clothes shop, gas station, McDonalds, and never once passing up the opportunity to woo the ladies, and in the end, drive off into the sunrise with a car full of ladies. He steps on the gas, blares the car's stero, and plays the Beach Boys soongs, dodging the headlights, moving forward, never stopping...

There was one strange detail however. In my imagination, the Gorou-sensei with his elbow on the driver seat door, holding the steering wheel wasn't an old man. His face resembled a high school boy who just had his 17th birthday, smiling as he goes towards the wind.

Afterword

I had mentioned this in many interviews, but actually, I'm not good at writing short stories. I couldn't remember how many of them I wrote, it felt that the time it took for me to finish a short story was the same as finishing a long one, and it was really inefficient.

So this year, in Spring, when the editor-in-charge said, “the manga's about to be serialized, so let's use this time to submit to Dengeki Bunko, shall me?” and I immediately answered,

“But I don't want to write any short stories, you know?”

“So then, what do you want to write?”

I answered that I didn't want to write, but it was interpreted as, anything other than short stories will do. This really was an impressive way to look at things. Left with no choice, I pondered for a little while, and answered,

“Erm, then, let's write a long story of decent length. How about serializing it as four chapters? The time taken will be about the same as usual, I can finish all the manuscript before serialization begins, and read through it first...”

Thinking back about it, it was really embarrassing for me to say without such basis. I was always one without any plans, and never actually followed through with my plans. As everyone could expect, I was last on the submission deadline for two whole months, and only completed this story in 4 parts.

The content of this volume, the 'Hanamaru Wedding' serialized in the Dengeki Bunko Magazine from the 14th issue to the 17th issue, caused every party involved much trouble, and at the same time, a brand new short story is included. It's the first time I serialized a novel in a magazine, and I learned a few lessons, so for the time being, I won't do that again. Right now, I'm reflecting hard on it.

Also, the actual story, when compiled into a book, was divided into 5 chapters, but the 5th chapter was actually a third of the final chapter that was split apart. I tried finishing the work in the 4th serialization, and the final chapter ended up being double in length of the first three chapters combined. Thus, when compling, I did a little tweak to it.

When I submitted the manuscript for the last volume, I said to the editor-in-charge, half jokingly,

“How about we have the serialization end at this particular scene (the ending of what was the 4th chapter), and then have brand new content declaring the case closed in the book itself, ok?”

Actually, that was a little suggestion due to my greed of wanting the easy way out, but I never thought the editor-in-charge would go, “hmm, we can think about it” and really started looking into the possibility. My suggestion might have appeared to leave a distinct segment in the story, but it was really an iinsult to the readers who bought the magazine. So I hurriedly retracted this suggestion.

The Gigolo-sensei who appeared in the short story was a character I vaguely thought up of when writing the final chapter. If there was a moment for this character to debut, I suppose this would be the most appropriate, and so, it seemed decent.

The short story included was about Hiro and his master, and I guess many readers felt that the 6th volume was centered around Hiro in the first place, right? To be honest, before I started writing, I had a concept of having Hiro and Min-san be the protagonists and develop them greatly, but after writing, I found that it wasn't the case.

I recall back to when I wrote the first volume of the 'Kamisama no Memochou' series. Surprisingly, it was 4years ago. Back then, I wasn't used to writing, and needed the editor-in-charge to review the plot progression, and after a few corrections, it was finally completed. Till now, I still remember the long, arduous editing process. For example, at the earliest part, when I wrote about Ayaka bringing Narumi to 'Hanamaru', there was no such character as Min-san. The original version of the ramen shop boss was a grizzled old bear uncle without a

name or a part, and when the editor-in-charge saw that, he committed, “lacking in beauty', and suggested that I follow the proposal during the planning phase, and change one of the 3 NEET detective agency members to a girl. However, I refuted, saying, “This is something I definitely won't change.” I also insisted that Tetsu, Major and Hiro had to be male. However, it's true that we're lacking in some beauties in the story, so by process of elimination, I had the bear uncle change into a boisterous big-breasted onee-san with a sarashi around her chest. This was how Min-san was born.

As for that bear uncle, what next?

Well, he didn't get erased in the wasteland of destroyed ideas. In my mind, this bear uncle just went on a trip. The Chinese work in his hand became a rifle, and the apron at his waist became a bullet chain as he starts wandering around in warzones like Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Congo and China or such.

And so, 'Ramen Hanamaru' became a place named because of him, and left for his sake. In that case, I had to write a story of him returning to the ramen shop, a story written for him. Maybe this idea had sprouted unconsciously in my mind.

I wrote this at the beginning of the story, and I shall repeat it again. This volume 6 is a story dedicated to Hanada Masaru.

His life journey was filled with ash, chicken bones, blood and sweat, and where shall it lead to? I hope that everyone would look on until the very end.

Soon after this volume is published, the manga volumes illustrated by Tiv-san will be released. The TV animation is currently in the planning phase. I'm really delighted. Please look forward to further news.

Thanks to all those involved, especially the illustrator Kishida Mel-san and the editor-in-charge Yuasa-sama, Narumi was finally able to welcome his 17th birthday. Please allow me the chane to express his thanks for him. Really, thank you everyone.

December 2010, Sugii Hikaru

Notes

1. ↑ Primitive = Dasai, ダサい
2. ↑ The san in お産, osan, can be read as 三, or three
3. ↑ M-1 Grand Prix takes place every December, and is a manzai comedy competition, a type of stand-up comedy in Japan.
4. ↑ In this case, Noren Curtains
5. ↑ Veteran actress. One of the shows she had a leading role in was called 'The housemake saw it, 家政婦は見た!
6. ↑ 崩牙会...which, when translated from Chinese would mean...Crumbling Teeth Association
7. ↑ continues to rain ホンコン, honkon sounds like Hong Kong.
8. ↑ Yasukuni Shrine, where the fallen Japanese during the wars since the Meiji Restoration in 1869 were recorded. Of course, this includes the top generals who led Japan during World War 2
9. ↑ traditional Chinese dress https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruqun
10. ↑ Or Great Bear
11. ↑ In other words, Ueno Park
12. ↑ This will be referred to later, so I won't translate this one
13. ↑ 釣りバカ日志, literally Fishing Fool's Diary
14. ↑ octopus dish
15. ↑ 2-5-6 and 4-5-6 can both be read as Jigoro = Gigolo

Kamisama no Memochou - Volume 06

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